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The Practices and Networks of Female Yiguan Dao Members in Buddhist Thailand

LIN Yu-Sheng

ABSTRACT: Yiguan Dao's similarity to Buddhism is often considered the reason for its expansion in Thailand and its attraction of not only ethnic Chinese members, but also Thai members. However, the teachings, practices, and networks of female Yiguan Dao members in Thailand are exemplary of Yiguan Dao's discontinuities with established Buddhism in Thailand. In Thai Theravāda Buddhism, women's full ordination as *bhikkhunīs* is not recognized by the authorities and much of the public, and women are considered subordinate to men in the religious dimension. Although certain ideas and practices regarding the reform of women's status in Thai Buddhism have made advances, most reforms continue to face difficulties under the restrictions of the Thai Buddhist establishment. Although some sexist elements exist in its teachings, Yiguan Dao, a new religious movement in modern Thailand existing outside the framework of Buddhism, offers its female members a competitive alternative to women's religious equality and geographic mobility in the pluralistic Thai religious marketplace.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand, Yiguan Dao, Chinese religion, women's and gender studies, Thailand, mobility, transregional networks

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Yiguan Dao (I-Kuan Tao, or *Anuttaratham* in the Thai language)¹ is a folk religious movement, blending elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Although Yiguan Dao is a prominent religious phenomenon in Thailand, there are few academic studies on this topic. Despite some sexist elements in its teachings, Yiguan Dao, a new religious movement in modern Thailand existing outside the framework of Buddhism, offers its female members a competitive alternative to women's religious equality and geographic mobility in the pluralistic Thai religious marketplace. This study considers the focus on the Chinese members of Chinese new religious movements in Thailand such as Yiguan Dao. By examining Yiguan Dao as an alternative religious movement in Thailand, this article reveals how the movement offers opportunities for the religious leadership of Thai laywomen as well as transregional networks within Thailand for women's increased geographic mobility.

For this study, I made several short-term fieldwork trips from 2012 to 2014, and one long-term fieldwork trip to Thailand from February 2014 to March 2015. I spent most of my time with Yiguan Dao members in Ubon Ratchathani city in northeastern Thailand. Additionally, I traveled with members to other Buddha Halls belonging to the same Yiguan Dao subgroup, particularly in Bangkok and in the lower northeastern area of Thailand.

Yiguan Dao emerged in China at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1950s, it was banned by the Chinese Communist government. Subsequently, some Yiguan Dao leaders and members moved to Taiwan. Despite being illegal under the Kuomintang government until 1987, Yiguan Dao spread quietly through this region. Beginning in the 1970s, it began to spread outside Taiwan, particularly to Southeast Asia. The movement expanded quickly there, owing to reasons discussed in this article. By 2009, there were more than seven thousand Yiguan Dao Buddha Halls² throughout Thailand, with more than two hundred thousand people participating in initiation rituals each year.³

It is difficult to use Yiguan Dao's Chinese origins and attributes to fully explain its growth in Thailand, as has been done in relation to other countries with Chinese populations receptive to Yiguan Dao. Scholars have shown that Yiguan Dao's ability to contribute to Chinese cultural revival played an important role in its growth in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore.⁴ Consequently, scholars have tended to relate Yiguan Dao's spread to the presence of the overseas Chinese community in various countries.⁵ However, unlike these countries, in Thailand there are many non-Chinese Yiguan Dao members.⁶ Thus, as Yiguan Dao in the Thai context is not exclusively connected with the Chinese diaspora, it warrants further scholarly attention.

Yiguan Dao's similarities to Buddhism can only partially explain its growth in Thailand. Many members say that because Yiguan Dao is close

to Buddhism, it has been able to expand in Thailand and successfully attract Thai members. However, if there were no differences between Yiguan Dao and Thai Buddhism, there would be no need for Thai members to follow Yiguan Dao practices rather than Buddhist ones. By considering reformist Buddhist movements in Thailand from the 1970s onward, which are contemporaneous with Yiguan Dao's spread in the country, I argue that we should pay greater attention to Yiguan Dao's discontinuities with established Buddhism in Thailand.

In this study, I discuss the practices and networks of Yiguan Dao Thai female members to demonstrate Yiguan Dao's discontinuities with Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand. As observers note when attending Yiguan Dao events in Thailand, female members usually greatly outnumber male members.⁷ This study presents two key reasons for the appeal of Yiguan Dao to its female members. First, Yiguan Dao offers a competitive alternative choice for its female members in the modern Thai religious marketplace, which is monk-dominated Thai Theravāda Buddhism and its related religious practices in which women are considered religiously subordinate and officially forbidden from being fully ordained *bhikkhunis* (female monastics). Moreover, I argue that at a time when rural people in Thailand increasingly seek work in cities, the emergence of Yiguan Dao has facilitated the increasing geographic mobility of Thai women beginning in the 1970s. Yiguan Dao female members have established transregional networks for mutual aid and support during life crises and in locating employment.

This study comprises four parts. First, I discuss Yiguan Dao's background and the means by which it was brought to Thailand. Second, I review the views of gender in Thai Buddhism and several Buddhist reform movements and religious practices in relation to women that were initiated in the 1970s. Third, I show that although some Yiguan Dao teachings on women are sexist, given that it is outside the government-supported institutions of Thai Theravāda Buddhism, Yiguan Dao offers increased opportunities for laywomen's religious leadership. Fourth, I show that, in addition to equality of religious practice and leadership in Yiguan Dao, female members use its structure to form transregional women's networks for mutual support in their daily lives and work. Finally, I present my observations and conclusion about how Yiguan Dao offers an alternative choice for Thai women in the pluralistic religious marketplace in Thailand.

BACKGROUND OF YIGUAN DAO AND ITS DISSEMINATION INTO THAILAND

Yiguan Dao is a Chinese folk religious movement, which was named by sixteenth Chinese patriarch Liu Qingxu (d. 1919) in 1886. However,

Yiguan Dao is connected with some former Chinese folk religious sects, such as Luo Jiao in the fifteenth century and the Way of Former Heaven (Xiantiandao) in the seventeenth century.⁸ Many concepts in Yiguan Dao, such as “the unification of five major religions” (*wujiaoheyi* in Mandarin); “the Eternal Mother” (*Wujilaomu* in Mandarin), who is the highest deity in Yiguan Dao; and “Three Stages Final Kalpa” (*sanqimoujie* in Mandarin; see description below) are beliefs about the coming of the Maitreya Buddha mixed with ideas from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Yiguan Dao members claim that their teaching is the “truth” (*dao* [path] in Mandarin, or *thamma* [Dhamma] in Thai),⁹ which is different from “religion” that changes in time and space. Yiguan Dao claims that the truth unifies the teachings of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam, and that the truth is the origin of the teachings of those five major religions. Yiguan Dao members promote vegetarianism,¹⁰ and integrate the vegetarian lifestyle with its beliefs.

In addition to hybridizing concepts from different religious traditions, messages from gods and spirits (the oracles) also play an important role in Yiguan Dao and its spread, particularly in spirit-writing (*fuluan* in Mandarin, or *krabasai* in Thai) and channeling (*jieqiao* in Mandarin, or *pratabyan* in Thai). Gods and spirits communicate with members via holy mediums. In the early period of Yiguan Dao in China, the holy mediums were both men and women. However, nowadays holy mediums are virtually all females who have not yet married. In spirit-writing, the god or the spirit gives a message to a medium, who writes it on a board. Moreover, there are two assistants in spirit-writing. One assistant reads out loud what the medium writes, and the other writes it down. In channeling, the god or the spirit uses the body of the holy medium to talk and move.

Yiguan Dao began at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) and spread rapidly to northern China when the Japanese army controlled this area (1937–1945). In the 1950s, after the “New China” was established, Yiguan Dao was considered a reactionary force by the Chinese Communists. Many Yiguan Dao members escaped from the People’s Republic of China to Taiwan, and gradually propagated Yiguan Dao there.¹¹ Although Yiguan Dao was also banned by the Kuomintang government in Taiwan in the early period, it nevertheless spread rapidly and became one of the biggest religious groups in Taiwan. In 1987, the year in which the Taiwanese government declared the end of martial law, it also lifted the ban on Yiguan Dao. The next year, Yiguan Dao established the Republic of China I-Kuan Tao Association and officially registered itself as a religion in Taiwan.

Although Yiguan Dao was disseminated into Thailand via two routes starting in the 1950s (one from Yunnan via Burma, the other from Hong Kong), it did not spread widely until the 1970s when Yiguan Dao groups from Taiwan initiated missions to Thailand.¹² In the

1970s, Yiguan Dao members from Taiwan began their missionary work in Thailand along with members from Malaysia and Singapore. Missionary members from Taiwan were both men and women. Some of them were raised up as *dianchuanshi* (masters) after their successful missionary work in Thailand, and were still living in Thailand when I did my fieldwork.

The early spread of Yiguan Dao in the 1970s in Thailand was similar to that in other places, and mainly depended on expatriate Taiwanese businessmen or local ethnic Chinese. However, from the 1980s onward, besides dissemination via the social relations of members, there were also other propagators, such as Thai men who had gone to Taiwan to work,¹³ and Thai students (mostly male) who went to Taiwan for education.¹⁴ The strong proselytizing attitude behind those propagations enabled Yiguan Dao in Thailand to spread beyond ethnic Chinese and appeal to other ethnic groups.¹⁵ Because of the addition of non-Chinese members from the 1980s onward, and the above-mentioned twenty-year lag before Yiguan Dao became widespread in Thailand, it is difficult to explain its dissemination within Thailand only by reference to Chinese living in Thailand. Therefore, I argue that we should turn our focus to social change in Thailand and Yiguan Dao's competition with the practice of other religions, especially Buddhism, in Thailand.

WOMEN AND BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

In Buddhism, a *bhikkhuni* is a fully ordained female monastic. In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, because the *bhikkhuni* lineage became extinct, no *bhikkhunis* could be officially ordained in Thailand, since there were no *bhikkhunis* to conduct the ordinations. In Thailand, the religious status of women is related not only to the inability of women to be fully ordained as Theravāda *bhikkhunis*, but also to patriarchal conceptions of gender in Thai culture, in which it is believed by many (but not all) Thai Buddhists that to be born female is an indication of bad karma from previous lives.¹⁶ Women gain merit when their sons are ordained as monks, even if for a temporary period,¹⁷ and by engaging in other merit-making activities such as giving food to monks, preparing for Buddhist rituals, or singing Buddhist paean *saraphan* for offering.

Anthropologist Charles F. Keyes has argued that while women have a gendered image as mother-nurturers in stories and sermons read by monks in rural villages in northern and northeastern Thailand, this is not necessarily related to women's perceived religious inferiority. He points out that Thai women's role as mother-nurturer is seen as being consistent with their economic work on behalf of their families in the fields,

markets, shops, and other types of jobs. Furthermore, Buddhist women are the mother-nurturers of the Buddha's teachings and his monks by more diligently providing food to monks than do laymen.¹⁸

Focusing on ritual practices in a northeastern Thai village, Stephen Sparkes analyzes gender symbolism to show that, in domestic rituals, women are symbolic of the perpetuation of the matrilineal family¹⁹ and men are symbolic of the protection and control of authority and ownership. That is, men and women are considered complementary in the domestic sphere. In Buddhism, men have a higher symbolic status than women. Men and women are set within a hierarchy. This coincides with the gender views in the rural society. Men are encouraged to leave their natal villages. They follow the "going around" (*pai thiao*) pattern to "wander around the country seeking work, adventure, excitement, fame and fortune," and possibly a wife. Alternately, as Buddhist monks men tend to move to other temples outside their hometown with their ecclesiastical advancement.²⁰ In contrast to the positive attitude toward the geographic mobility of men (although traditionally Thai women do farming with men and work in the small business sector to supply their households), up until recent decades women's mobility was usually restricted and they did not go far away from home. These ideas still hold true in modern Thailand where, since the 1970s, women began migrating from rural villages to work in cities. Their parents and other villagers in the rural societies feel anxiety about women's geographic mobility, and their migration usually causes conflicts with their parents.²¹

Women's status as celibate religious in organized Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand is much less prominent than the monks, the *bhikkhus*, whose status is upheld by government sanction. Although women cannot be ordained as *bhikkhunīs* in the Thai Theravāda Buddhist Sangha, there are many Buddhist movements agitating for women's religious equality or opportunities in Thailand. There were three attempted *bhikkhunī* revival movements in Thailand in the twentieth century. The first wave of *bhikkhunī* revival movements occurred in the 1920s and was led by Narin Phasit (1874–1950), who used to be the governor of Nakhon Nayok Province. His two daughters were ordained as *sāmaṇerīs* (female novices), to become future *bhikkhunīs*. Ultimately, this endeavor was unsuccessful, and the Supreme Patriarch of the Sangha banned male monks or novices from serving as preceptors for women's ordination. This incident left Thai people with the impression that it is impossible to introduce *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand. In addition, the women ordained in the last two waves of *bhikkhunī* revival movements—from the 1970s onward—have not been recognized by the Thai authorities as legitimate Theravāda Buddhist *bhikkhunīs*. The second wave was led mainly by Bhikkhuni Voramai Kabilsingh (1908–2003) starting in 1971. However, as Kabilsingh was ordained as

a *bhikkhuni* in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage in Taiwan, the Thai public recognized her as being a Mahāyāna *bhikkhuni*, not Theravāda. The third wave is led primarily by Kabilsingh's daughter, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (b. 1944), known as Bhikkhuni Dhammananda after receiving ordination. She not only received *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, but has also worked with Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women for many years. She is the abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery founded by her mother. Besides her efforts, there are also other Thai local female novice and *bhikkhuni* ordinations. However, all of them are not recognized by the Thai Sangha and government as legal Theravāda Buddhist female novices or *bhikkhunīs*.²²

Because of the restrictions on *bhikkhunīs*, most celibate female Buddhist practitioners choose to practice as *maechīs*, but they usually lead difficult lives. *Maechīs* are white-garbed Buddhist women in Thailand living an ascetic life and holding eight or ten precepts. This status lies somewhere between a lay follower and a fully ordained *bhikkhuni*. *Maechīs* are usually not considered suitable fields of merit for financial support because donating to them is thought to bring less merit to the donors than donating to monks.²³ People usually think that “women become *maechi* because they have serious suffering in secular life, such as a broken heart, being disappointed somehow, or are taking a religious costume in order to beg.”²⁴ Recently, prominent *maechīs*, such as Maechi Sansanee Sthirasuta or other self-governed *maechīs* (not under the control of monks), have had improved education or opportunities to engage in religious practices.²⁵ Most of them are affiliated with independent nunneries (called *samnak chī*),²⁶ or *maechīs'* temples (distinct from monasteries), where *maechīs* live together and undertake studies or religious practices. In some monasteries with progressive abbots, *maechi* might assist in the teaching of meditation practices and provide support in basic dharma teaching. However, two attempts to encourage Thai authorities to recognize the legal status of *maechīs* have failed, and many *maechīs*²⁷ still live in monasteries as housekeepers for the monks, and have no chance to develop an ordained life that contrasts fully with the lay lifestyle.²⁸

In modern Thailand, Thai Buddhist laywomen, who cannot be ordained as *bhikkhunīs* or are reluctant to accept the disadvantageous situation of *maechīs*, may undertake religious practice within a different category of practitioner. Since the time of the Buddha, there have been female lay Buddhists called *ubāsikās* who take what are called the five precepts. However, different from general pious lay Buddhist women, there are some world-renouncing charismatic *ubāsikās* respected as *nak buat* (renouncers) in Thailand. They don't persist in *bhikkhuni* ordination or *maechi* tradition, but choose to abandon all secular forms and decorations to lead ascetic lives.²⁹

Besides *bhikkhunīs*, *maechīs*, and *ubāsikās*, there are some other categories of women's religious status between that of laywomen and fully ordained nuns in reformist Buddhist movements in Thailand. For example, in order to avoid the dispute over the reintroduction of *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993)³⁰ proposed the status of *dhammamātā*, which literally means “dharma mother,” for Buddhist women.³¹ There are also differentiated female groups in the modern Buddhist temple Wat Phra Dhammakaya. One founder of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Chandra Khonnokyoong (1909–2000), called Khun Yai³² by members, was a white-garbed *maechī*. Economically prosperous women who donate substantial amounts of money to gain merit (such women are called *kanlayanamit*)³³ are respected by other members in the temple. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has support systems for *ubāsikās* as well. Another Buddhist group, Santi Asoke, has a ranking system for both male and female members. Women follow six stages to advance to the highest level called *sikkhamat* (“studying mother”).³⁴ This demonstrates that urban Buddhist movements have initiated certain changes in regard to religious roles for women. However, Wat Phra Dhammakaya does not challenge the restriction on women receiving ordination as *bhikkhunīs*.³⁵ Although the position of *sikkhamat* in Santi Asoke challenges the imputed religious inferiority of women in Thai Theravāda Buddhism, female members take longer than men to advance to the highest level, and the number of *sikkhamats* is restricted due to the response of mainstream Buddhist monks.³⁶

In addition to changes brought about by reformist Buddhist movements in relation to celibate women practitioners (nuns), changes in laywomen's status have also emerged in Thai folk religious practices. Spirit mediums have become popular in the modern urban social life, and have sometimes served to empower marginalized people, including women. However, as anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa has argued, those folk religious practitioners maintain an uncritical attitude toward women's religious and social constraints. While Thai popular religion may affirm or negotiate existing religious and socioeconomic structures, it is rarely a source of resistance against them.³⁷

In sum, in traditional Thai Buddhist culture, women are usually considered subordinate to men religiously, or seen as mother-nurturers who should remain close to home as they work to support their families. While women cannot be fully ordained as Buddhist *bhikkhunīs*, some of them choose to be *maechīs*, *ubāsikās*, or *sikkhamats* in temples or different modern Buddhist movements in Thailand. Additionally, Thai folk religious practices have empowered some women in ways that differ from Buddhism. However, for the most part, although offering new opportunities for women, most of these options have not challenged established Buddhism in Thailand in terms of its

gender ideology, and face difficulties from the aforementioned restrictions and mainstream thinking—such as the limited numbers of *sikkhamats* in Santi Asoke—while negotiating or compromising with established Buddhism.

Alternative options in Thai Buddhist society reveal opportunities for women, in addition to those found in the Thai Buddhist establishment, in terms of greater freedom of movement and independence as well as religious practice. Although *maechis* are not recognized as legal renunciants, their status as “women in between”³⁸ gives them more freedom beyond the regulations of the Buddhist Sangha and the government.³⁹ *Maechis* affiliated with *samnak chis* can obtain more support and freedom through other networks than those *maechis* who stay in the monasteries dominated by Buddhist monks.⁴⁰ This situation is similar to the status of Chinese temples in Thailand. Chinese temples also are not recognized as “religion” by the Thai state, but this status outside established Buddhism gives members more opportunities for engaging in many non-religious activities, such as running hospitals, participating in Chinese associations, and so on, without interference from the state.⁴¹ In a similar way, Yiguan Dao’s status⁴² outside the Thai Buddhist Sangha of monks recognized by the government helps its women members go beyond the social and religious restrictions on women in modern Thailand to become lay leaders in Yiguan Dao institutions. Additionally, transregional networks of Yiguan Dao members within Thailand provide women with mutual support and greater geographic mobility for their spiritual and economic endeavors.

WOMEN IN THE TEACHINGS OF YIGUAN DAO IN THAILAND

With ideas that emphasize women’s karmic incompleteness and their domestic roles in the family, the teachings of Yiguan Dao appear to be sexist with regard to women’s status in modern society. However, some of Yiguan Dao’s doctrines also assert women’s equality with men and can fulfill women’s religious needs.

Yiguan Dao conveys teachings about women’s imperfections and domestic roles deriving from Chinese folk interpretations of Mahāyāna Buddhist and Confucian ideas. In Yiguan Dao, the two concepts of “five imperfections of the female body”⁴³ (*nushenwulou* in Mandarin) and “women made five hundred lesser merits in the previous life” (*nuxingshaoxiuwubaigong* in Mandarin) are derived from folk Chinese Buddhism and emphasize the karmic limitations of women.⁴⁴ At the same time, Yiguan Dao also places great emphasis on women’s social roles from a patriarchal Confucian perspective, particularly their contributions to their families while being subordinated to men. For example, within the family, women must structure

their actions according to the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*sancongside* in Mandarin). A female's Three Obediences are in relation to three men, namely the father before her marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son after the husband's death. The Four Virtues for women are morality, physical charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework. Confucian morality and virtue are valued in Yiguan Dao. In particular, Yiguan Dao members consider the present world to be lacking in order and morality because family ethics have been lost. Thus, they appeal to women to fulfill their responsibilities toward their families as spelled out in the Three Obediences and Four Virtues.

Although Yiguan Dao emphasizes the imperfections of women and the need for their subordination, it names those karmic and social differences *houtian* (literally "after heaven" or "later heaven"), and distinguishes *houtian* from the *xiantian* (literally "before heaven" or "former heaven") equal nature of women and men before they are born to this world. Therefore, Yiguan Dao does not teach ideas found in patriarchal Buddhist and Daoist cultures that women need to be reborn as men, or transcend or transform their embodied femaleness in the present life, to achieve enlightenment. Since in Yiguan Dao women and men are believed to have the same *xiantian* nature before they are born, both can achieve *nirvāna* if they know and practice the truth.⁴⁵

In popular Thai Buddhist understandings, there are different opinions about whether women can achieve *nirvāna*. Some believe ordination is necessary for *nirvāna*, but full ordination of women is not officially recognized in Thailand by the monks' Sangha Supreme Council and by the government. Some believe there are other ways that women can achieve *nirvāna*. What is important for this study is that Yiguan Dao female members believe in the advantage given to women in Yiguan Dao as opposed to Buddhism since the teachings of Yiguan Dao emphasize that one can achieve *nirvāna* without monastic ordination if she or he knows the truth.

According to Yiguan Dao, the history of humankind is divided into three periods: the Green Yang (*qingyang* in Mandarin, or *yuk khiao* in Thai), Red Yang (*hongyang* in Mandarin, or *yuk daeng* in Thai), and White Yang (*baiyang* in Mandarin, or *yuk khao* in Thai). In the Green Period, only kings knew the truth. In the Red Period, the truth was extended to the ordained. In the White Period, however, in which we now live, everyone can know the truth.⁴⁶ In other words, in the past, only kings and monks were able to achieve *nirvāna*, but now it is believed that all people who know the truth from Yiguan Dao, regardless of whether they are men or women, can achieve *nirvāna* without ordination. Consequently, whether women can be ordained monastics is not an issue in Yiguan Dao, as it is in Thai Theravāda Buddhism.

In the history of Yiguan Dao, many women have become masters (*dianchuanshi*)⁴⁷ and have played important roles as Yiguan Dao leaders. Zhang Tianran (1889–1947), who was called Honored Master (*shizun* in Mandarin) as the eighteenth patriarch, and Sun Huiming (1895–1975), who was called Mother Master (*shimu* in Mandarin), were the first joint male-female patriarchs in the lineage of patriarchs in Yiguan Dao. Sun moved to Hong Kong and then Taiwan after Yiguan Dao was banned in the People's Republic of China, and led most of the Yiguan Dao groups in Taiwan. Yiguan Dao members call this assumption of leadership by women *kundaoyingyun* (literally meaning “females will arise when the time requires”) in the White Yang Period. This explains not only why there are female leaders in Yiguan Dao, but some members also take it as a reason to explain why there are more female members active in Yiguan Dao. Besides Mother Master Sun, there have also been many other female leaders in each subgroup of Yiguan Dao, for example, Chen Hongzhen (1923–2008) in the Fayi Chongde group, Li Yuming (1912–1983) and Chen Jinlian (1915–1991) in the Fayi Lingyin group, and so on. In Thailand, we can also see many local female Yiguan Dao leaders. For example:

[Case 1] *Female who has passed away, born in Ayutthaya Province.*

She took her first job in Ranong Province, and then moved to Phrae Province, and became a member of Yiguan Dao upon her friend's invitation. She then had to move to Loei Province in northeastern Thailand because of work. At first, she did not want to move there because she did not know anyone, and did not know whether or not there were Yiguan Dao Buddha Halls there. However, finally, she was persuaded by her friends and moved. In Loei, she established her own Yiguan Dao Buddha Hall, and opened a vegetarian restaurant. She invited many people to become members and greatly helped to extend the Yiguan Dao network in upper northeastern Thailand. Because of her contributions, after she passed away, she was given the sacred title Xianjun [fairy goddess], and is respected by members.

As this case reveals, in Thailand, local female members can also become *dianchuanshi* in some Yiguan Dao groups. Some have even become bodhisattvas (*pusa* in Mandarin)⁴⁸ or are given other sacred titles after death, and are respected by Yiguan Dao members. This female leadership is linked with the equal ranking system in Yiguan Dao. As men and women have the same *xiantian* nature, their upward movement in the ranks inside Yiguan Dao is the same. Within the ranking system, women and men have equal opportunities to progress from general members to *dianchuanshi*. For example, in the Fayi Lingyin group, both men and women can become *banshi* (helper, *phutthaborikon* in Thai), *tanzhu* (altar keeper, *chaotamnakphra* in

Thai), *jiangyuan* (assistant lecturer, *rongachanbanyai* in Thai), *jiangshi* (lecturer, *achanbanyai* in Thai), and then *dianchuanshi* (master, *achan thaithod boektham* in Thai), if they keep doing the religious practices.⁴⁹ This is different from Thai Buddhism; although there are Buddhist female religious leaders in modern Thai society, they have to find other ways to be recognized by the public rather than through ordination as officially recognized renunciators.

Some lecturers in Yiguan Dao emphasize this contrast with Thai Buddhism. For example, I attended a Yiguan Dao class in Uthumphon Phisai District, Sisaket Province, titled “The Model of the Truth: The Patriarchs” (*baebyang haeng tham phra banpachan* in Thai), taught by a female lecturer. Although the main content of this class concerned the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha as patriarchs in different eras, the lecturer also discussed the religious practices of contemporary women. She said that in the Yiguan Dao Fayi Lingyin group, female members are very important; to date, there have already been ten female bodhisattvas. Glossing over the fact that the Therīgāthā text in Theravāda Buddhism’s Pāli Canon reports the voices of enlightened women who lived during the Buddha’s time, she claimed that, to date, there have been five hundred arahats (“one who is worthy” who has achieved nirvana)⁵⁰ in Buddhism and three thousand disciples of Confucius, but none were women. However, in this era, more women than men come to practice Yiguan Dao. She thanked Mother Master Sun for shouldering the debt⁵¹ women had accrued, in order to give women of this era the chance to engage in the practice of Yiguan Dao. She ended by saying that, contrary to public opinion that women cannot engage in religious practices but should stay at home, everyone has the same chance to engage in religious practices in Yiguan Dao. Although what she described about women in Buddhism is not accurate, it shows how Yiguan Dao members comprehend the differences between Thai Buddhism and Yiguan Dao regarding religious equality of women.

In sum, in the teachings of Yiguan Dao, although women are asked to follow men and behave in accordance with prescribed women’s gender roles in the patriarchal family, equal religious opportunities for women are also emphasized resulting in laywomen’s religious leadership. Furthermore, active female leaders and women’s equal progress in Yiguan Dao’s ranking system also encourage the engagement of female members. Moreover, Yiguan Dao not only provides open religious opportunities for its female members, but also supports their geographic mobility for the purposes of work and mutual aid in modern Thai society. In the following, I will show that Thai female Yiguan Dao members use the framework of Yiguan Dao to form transregional women’s networks in modern Thailand that they may utilize for support, particularly when facing life crises.

YIGUAN DAO NETWORKS IN THAILAND AND MIGRATION OF WOMEN

Yiguan Dao's growth in Thailand has facilitated the frequent long-distance travel of its members and their transregional networks inside Thailand. The organization of Yiguan Dao in Thailand is a widely distributed and segmented system of networks that have enhanced transregional interactions among members.⁵² There are more than twenty-six groups and seven thousand Buddha Halls nationwide in Yiguan Dao in Thailand.⁵³ When events or activities take place in one location, members from other areas usually come to provide support. Moreover, the ranking system within Yiguan Dao also encourages long-distance movement of members. To become a lecturer or to ascend in rank, members typically have to take courses or exams in a central Buddha Hall far from home. In sum, Yiguan Dao's organizational framework for activities and its system of promotion in ranks, with which members need to move to take courses and exams faraway, facilitate long-distance movement of women as well as men.

The long-distance movement of Yiguan Dao female members contests the constraints on women's geographic mobility in Thai culture. As mentioned above, traditionally in Thailand, women are seen as the mother-nurturers of the family. Although they are not restricted in terms of their economic activities, women who travel far from home frequently face strong criticism.⁵⁴ In the 1960s, due to the government's economic development policy, the seasonal labor migration of men from rural villages to cities increased. However, from the 1970s onward, more women began to move to the cities to work as well.⁵⁵ Single women usually face tension and conflict with their parents at home because of the traditional restrictions on women's mobility.⁵⁶ Many Yiguan Dao female members contravene this social constraint on their geographic mobility when attending Yiguan Dao activities.

[Case 2] *A female member in her 50s from Yasothon Province.*

She works at a school providing meals for a daily wage of approximately 100 baht (around USD\$3.10). I met her at a three-day dharma seminar in Surin Province that she came to for assistance in September 2012. She said that it was typically impossible for her to travel so far from home (approximately 140 kilometers), but she had gained her husband's agreement and took a break from work to come to Surin. She added, "There are many women who are not able to travel far, especially as it is farming season now."

Yiguan Dao not only supports female members' geographic mobility when they attend Yiguan Dao events far from home, it also supports those who move from their hometowns to other places, those who return to

their hometowns after living or working outside for a period, and those who lead a transregional life. As Kiso Keiko mentions, there are two paths of migration for women from northeastern Thailand: migration for work and migration back to their hometown.⁵⁷ Yiguan Dao members use their religious networks of friends and acquaintances to migrate to other places and to maintain relations between their destination and their hometown.

[Case 3] *48-year-old female, born in Nakhon Ratchasima Province.*

She migrated to Bangkok when she was 20, and engaged in textile work around the Rama VI Bridge with her friends. When she was 24, because she felt that she had a difficult life in Bangkok, and hoped to relieve the suffering, she became a Yiguan Dao member when invited by other members. After that, she usually attended events or courses in the Buddha Hall in Bangkok. When she was 30, she moved to Yasothon Province, the hometown of her husband. Because she was busy with child-rearing and work, for a long time she seldom went to the Buddha Hall. She closed her business several years ago, and returned to help in the Buddha Hall when invited by other Yiguan Dao members. She helped to establish a public Buddha Hall in the neighborhood, and attends the events or courses very often. Furthermore, after closing her old business, she opened a vegetarian restaurant.

[Case 4] *Female in her 30s, born in Chong Mek town, Ubon Ratchathani Province.*

She went to Bangkok for computer control work in a textile factory in her 20s. Her colleague invited her to become a Yiguan Dao member and she began participating in Yiguan Dao worship and activities. After her mother's death, she returned to her hometown and took care of her grandparents. She received a monthly remittance from her brother, who was working in Bangkok, and opened a small vegetarian restaurant and also made some snacks. She helped to establish the Buddha Hall in Chong Mek, and usually went to help at the events and courses of the Buddha Hall in Ubon Ratchathani city as well.

[Case 5] *57-year-old female, born in Yasothon Province.*

She worked in a plastic factory in Bangkok from the ages of 14 to 35. During this period, she had an interest in the activities of Santi Asoke, and attended their events very often. She met her husband attending an event of Santi Asoke. They returned to Yasothon Province after their marriage. After her husband's accidental death, she had to raise her daughter by herself, which made life quite difficult. She became a Yiguan Dao member when her friend invited her. She hoped that it would make her difficult life better and that her daughter could grow up peacefully. When her daughter planned to go to study at university in Ubon Ratchathani Province, she moved there with her. She got to know another Yiguan Dao member who was the owner of a vegetarian restaurant near the university,

and asked for permission to work there. She then gradually got to know other Yiguan Dao members, and now attends the local Yiguan Dao event each Sunday.

Yiguan Dao has facilitated the formation of transregional networks among women that support their geographic mobility. During Yiguan Dao events and activities, men (*qian dao* in Mandarin) and women (*kun dao* in Mandarin)⁵⁸ are kept strictly separate. Because of this division, women are able to build strong relationships with each other during events. These relationships persist even after such events are over. Such relationships are not only religious; female members also make use of their Yiguan Dao transregional networks of people when facing crises in their daily lives. During my fieldwork, I often saw female members consulting with each other about the problems they faced in their families or work. These transregional networks also provide practical support for Yiguan Dao female members in Thailand, particularly when they face problems due to their participation in urban mobility and modern life.

[Case 6] *Dao and Jan, who are sisters in their 50s, from Ubon Ratchathani Province.*

Jan studied accounting in high school and began to play music in bands from that period onward. After graduation, she went to Bangkok and did accounting work for two years. After that, because her band moved to Mahasarakham, and her sister Dao went there to open a small restaurant, Jan moved there and helped with cooking and gave performances. Jan also got married. Then, because Dao was offered a job playing music at a hotel in Sisaket, Jan and her husband moved there. After working there for a short period, Dao and Jan opened their own restaurant, in which they served not only food, but also alcohol. The restaurant also featured musical performances. Although everything seemed to be going well, they gradually began to have some problems in their lives. At first, their restaurant was a successful business and many government administrators even ate there. However, because the restaurant was open at night and sold alcohol, it was beset with fighting and trouble. In 1994, Jan and her husband divorced because of her husband's extramarital affairs. In the same year, a friend of one of the sisters invited them to become Yiguan Dao members. After becoming members, they still sold meat and alcohol in their restaurant, which contradicted the teachings of Yiguan Dao. However, because of the fighting and trouble, they began to pray to the gods of Yiguan Dao for help, and came to believe that selling alcohol and meat was sinful. The sisters closed their restaurant and threw themselves into disseminating the teachings of Yiguan Dao. They returned to Ubon Ratchathani and lived in the large house of a Yiguan Dao member who had migrated to the United States. Both now devote most of their time to Yiguan Dao activities. Jan has opened a small vegetarian restaurant, which she uses to spread vegetarianism and the teachings of Yiguan Dao.

Dao and Jan moved to the city and opened their own business. When their business went badly and Jan faced marital problems, they depended on Yiguan Dao and fellow members to help them face their crises. In addition to spiritual comfort and ethical guidance, they found practical help from Yiguan Dao members in other places to set up a new life. Dao and Jan were able to live in Ubon Ratchathani for free because of the goodwill of another female Yiguan Dao member. They were even able to use this goodwill as a foundation on which to build relationships and network with other members.

[Case 7] *A woman in her 30s from Surat Thani Province in southern Thailand.*

She worked in Penang, Malaysia for five years. She said that when she was in Malaysia, she drank alcohol and went dancing. Subsequently, she returned to Thailand and her friend introduced her to Yiguan Dao. Her parents had already passed away, so when she married, she went to live with her husband's parents in Nakhon Sawan Province in central Thailand. However, her husband received money from his parents and used it to drink alcohol with friends and take drugs. Her husband was also sometimes violent toward her. After she gave birth, she decided to leave Nakhon Sawan Province with her son. First, she went back to Surat Thani, in the south, to collect some belongings. She went to Bangkok, then moved to Jan and Dao's house in Ubon Ratchathani. She knew Jan from Bangkok. A Yiguan Dao member had introduced her to a vegetarian restaurant in which Jan was working at the time. She and Jan had met twice subsequently during Yiguan Dao events, but were not very close. However, because they were "dharma relatives" (*daoqin* in Mandarin, or *yatitham* in Thai),⁵⁹ she called Jan to ask whether she could move into her house and Jan agreed. Several days later, her husband called her and said he missed his child. He moved to Ubon Ratchathani and became a Yiguan Dao member as well. At first, they lived in Jan and Dao's house and helped with housework and at Jan's vegetarian restaurant. Jan and Dao also helped take care of their child. Six months later, the family moved out to rent a house near the Yiguan Dao Buddha Hall, and the wife and husband continued to help Jan with work and religious events.

From this case, we see that a woman who had lost her parents and faced problems of domestic violence without any other local support utilized the Yiguan Dao transregional women's network in Thailand to help create a new life elsewhere.

Besides religious equality for women, the transregional networks of people facilitated by Yiguan Dao also supports the mobility and solidarity of Yiguan Dao female members. In 1976, social anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah (1929–2014) described the Thai Buddhist temple networks in the countryside, provincial towns, and Bangkok as promoting the geographic mobility of monks.⁶⁰ However, these Buddhist networks

seldom provide opportunities for women. In contrast, the Yiguan Dao transregional networks of women support the mobility of women to and from their hometowns, while also facilitating mutual aid among Yiguan Dao female members, particularly when they face crises or problems. In this way, Yiguan Dao provides a context for practical support of its female members in modern life, and has become an alternative choice of religion in the Thai religious marketplace.

CONCLUSION

In Thailand, in contrast to men who can be ordained as *bhikkhus*, women's full ordination as *bhikkhunīs* is not recognized by the Thai Buddhist authorities, by the government, or by all Thai Buddhists. With the emphasis on women as mother-nurturers, Thai women traditionally were limited in their geographic mobility for the purposes of work and spiritual practice. In the contemporary period, religious practices in urban Buddhist movements and folk religions are offering more options to women who seek religiosity. However, typically, those offering religious lifestyles to women have sought to compromise or coexist with the established Buddhist framework, rather than challenge it. The exception is Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, and the novices, probationers, and other *bhikkhunīs* at Songdhammakalyani Monastery, but their legitimacy has not been acknowledged by the Buddhist authorities and the Thai government.

At first glance, Yiguan Dao appears to take a sexist stance in regard to women's family and social roles because of its adoption of patriarchal understandings of Mahāyāna Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian gender perspectives. The emphasis on these teachings may change in Yiguan Dao in Thailand similar to how in Yiguan Dao in Taiwan the idea of *kundaoyingyun* ("females will arise when the time requires") has now become more popular than the ideas of women's imperfection and subordination to men described above.⁶¹ As Yiguan Dao in Thailand is outside organized Thai Therāvada Buddhism, it is not regulated by the Buddhist authorities and can offer female members more equal opportunities in spiritual practice and leadership. In contrast to the restrictions on women in Thai Therāvada Buddhism, Yiguan Dao provides laywomen members with equal participation in religious activities and a system in which women are promoted equally to religious service and leadership ranks. Women in Yiguan Dao in Thailand can move beyond social constraints on their geographic mobility and build transregional networks with other women that benefit their search for employment. This differs from the Therāvada Buddhist establishment in Thailand that is supported by the government and Buddhist transregional networks that mainly focus on monks. From the perspective of daily life,

women who migrate and lead urban lives can use the Yiguan Dao networks they have built to provide mutual support and overcome difficulties. In sum, despite some sexist gender ideology, Yiguan Dao in Thailand provides its female members with more religious equality, geographic mobility, and transregional women's solidarity in terms of its teachings, practices, and daily life than traditional Thai Buddhism and other related religious practices.

This study also helps us to reflect on the literature on the overseas Chinese and Thai religions. Instead of associating Yiguan Dao with solely Chinese populations or considering Yiguan Dao an extension of Thai Buddhism, I propose that we should consider Yiguan Dao a new religious movement in the competitive Thai religious marketplace. Different from Yiguan Dao in other countries or some other Chinese religious movements in Thailand, such as Dejiao or the Way of Former Heaven (Xiantiandao),⁶² Yiguan Dao in Thailand is not strongly connected with Chinese communities or the Chinese cultural revival. In terms of the status of women in religion in Thailand, we can see several Buddhist movements and other religious practices making efforts to improve women's religious opportunities. Yiguan Dao in Thailand is a competitive alternative in the pluralistic Thai religious market with regard to women's religious equality and geographic mobility because it exists apart from the male-dominated institutions of Thai Buddhism.

ENDNOTES

¹ In most academic writings, scholars use "Yiguan Dao" based on the Hanyu Pinyin system of romanization. However, mainstream Yiguan Dao groups in Taiwan use "I-Kuan Tao" as their official name based on the Wade-Giles system of romanization. In Thailand, members use either the term "Yiguan Dao" or the Sanskrit-based Thai term "Anuttaratham," which means the truth (*tham*) that has nothing higher than it (*anuttara*). In this study, I use the general academic term "Yiguan Dao" to refer to this movement.

² Yiguan Dao members call the place in which they conduct their worship, events, and gatherings Buddha Halls (*fotang* in Mandarin, or *hongphra* in Thai). For this reason, Buddhists sometimes criticize Yiguan Dao members for using the name of the Buddha to deceive others. Yiguan Dao members also sometimes call them Dao Places (*daochang* in Mandarin, or *sathantham* in Thai), which usually causes confusion with Buddhist or Daoist sites as well.

³ This description is according to SUNG Kwang-yu, *Tian Dao Gou Chen* (Taipei: Wanjuanlou, 2010), 234. In this revised book published in 2010, Sung mentioned that more than 200,000 people perform the initiation rituals and become Yiguan Dao members in Thailand each year, without indicating any clear source for this information. However, there are no exact data to verify the number of members because there is no institution that gathers membership data from different Yiguan Dao groups in Thailand. When I talked with a senior master of the Fayi

Chongde group, one of the biggest Yiguan Dao groups in Thailand, in 2014, he said that before the founding of the Association of Yiguan Dao in Thailand in 2000, for the Fayi Chongde group, around 50,000 to 60,000 people would perform the initiation rituals and become Yiguan Dao members each year, and that, following this, the number increased to more than 100,000 people each year.

⁴ For example, Hubert Seiwert, “Religious Response to Modernization in Taiwan: the Case of I-Kuan Tao,” *Journal of Hong Kong Branch, Royal Asiatic Society* 21 (1981): 43–70; SUNG Kwang-yu, “Zongjiaochuanbo, shangyehudong yu wenhuarentong: yiguan dao zai xinjiapo de chuanbo” [Religious Dissemination, Business Activities, and Cultural Identity: The Dissemination and Development of Yiguan Dao in Singapore], *Guoli taiwandaxue wenshizhe xuebao* [Bulletin of the College of Liberal Arts] 47 (1997): 213–58; and SUNG Kwang-yu, “Yiguan dao, lilao, wo: diaocha yiguan dao sanshinian de huigu he yixie xiangfa” [Yiguan Dao, Professor Li, and Me: A Review and Some Ideas Regarding 30 Years of Research on Yiguan Dao], *Taiwan zongjiaoyanjiu tongxun* [The Newsletter of Taiwan Religious Studies] 5 (2003): 73–98.

⁵ For example, Sung, “Zongjiaochuanbo, shangyehudong yu wenhuarentong”; Soo Khin Wah, “Malaixiya yiguan dao de lishi jiqi fazhanjinkuang” [The History and Recent Development of Yiguan Dao in Malaysia], *Taiwan zongjiaoyanjiu tongxun* [The Newsletter of Taiwan Religious Studies] 5 (2003): 99–112; and SHEN Yeh-ying, “Yinni houxinzhixushidai zhi huaren zongjiaofuxing” [The Revival of Chinese Religions after Indonesia’s Post-New Order Age: The Example of Yiguan Dao’s Development], *Taiwan dongnanya xuekan* [Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies] 10, no. 2 (2015): 105–28.

⁶ LIN Yu-sheng, “Taiguo yiguan dao de fazhan yu jingjishehui bianqian” [The Development of Yiguan Dao (I-Kuan Tao) and Socio-economic Change in Thailand], *Yatai yanjiu luntan* [Asia-Pacific Forum] 61 (2015): 55–85.

⁷ During my fieldwork in 2014–2015, the female to male ratio of members attending different courses or events was around 3:1.

⁸ WANG Jianchuan, “Xiantiandao qianqishi chutan: jianlun qiyi Yiguandao de guanxi” [The Prehistory of Xiantiandao, and Its Relation with Yiguan Dao], in *Taiwan de zhaijiao yu luntang* [The Vegetarian Sects and Halls in Taiwan] (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1996), 75–114.

⁹ Although Yiguan Dao members call this term *dao* (path) in Mandarin, or *thamma* (Dhamma) in Thai, the meaning is different from *dao* in Daoism and *thamma* in Buddhism. In order to avoid confusion, I translate it into “truth” as Yiguan Dao claims it transcends and unifies different religious concepts.

¹⁰ Although in many Yiguan Dao groups, eggs and dairy products are not strictly prohibited, in Thailand most members follow the local Chinese Buddhist ideas of *che* (*zhai* in Mandarin, literally it means “vegetarian”), and do not eat eggs and dairy products.

¹¹ Sung, *Tian Dao Gou Chen*, 141–208.

¹² MU Yu, *Yiguandao gaiyao* [The Summary of Yiguan Dao] (Taipei: The Republic of China I-Kuan Tao Association, 2002), 156–57.

¹³ Transnational Thai workers working in Taiwan in the 1980s–1990s were mainly men. The male to female ratio was around 10:1. See LIN Yu-sheng, “Yuanxing yu zuogongde: taiguodongbeishehui nanxing kuaguo yigong de

xingbiezhengzhi yu xingdongyiyi [Mobility and Making Merit: The Gender Politics and the Meaning of Actions of Transnational Migrant Workers from Northeast Thailand], *Taiwan dongnanya xuekan* [Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies] 10, no. 1 (2014): 33–70.

¹⁴ Lin, “Taiguo Yiguandao de fazhan,” 61–68.

¹⁵ LIN Yu-sheng, “Tai ni okeru ikkandō no sosiki hatten to ningen no ryūdōse” [The Organizational Development of Yiguan Dao (I-Kuan Tao) in Thailand and Human Mobility], *Tōnan ajia kenkyū* [Southeast Asian Studies] 53, no. 2 (2016): 210–11.

¹⁶ HSIEH Shih-chung, “Shuangbian jicheng yu xingbie dengwei: daludongnanya taiyuxi-nanchuanfojiao de wenhuajizhi” [Bilateral Inheritance and Sexual Equality: On Cultural Base in Tai-Buddhist Communities in Mainland Southeast Asia], in *Liubingxiang xiansheng jinianwenji* [Essays in Honor of Professor LIU Pin-Hsiung], LIN Mei-rong, GUO Pei-yi, and HUANG Chih-huei, eds. (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 2008), 519.

¹⁷ In Thailand, many men will ordain as monks and stay in the Sangha for a short period of time. This not only makes merit to repay their parents’ grace, but also functions as a rite of passage to become mature men.

¹⁸ Charles F. Keyes, “Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand,” *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 2 (1984): 223–41.

¹⁹ Stephen Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls: Gender and Cosmology in an Isan village in Northeast Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2005). In Thailand, inheritance reflects the bilateral system where male and female children usually receive an equal share. However, in practice, because of the matrilineal residence in the rural areas, parents tend to leave houses and other properties to the youngest daughter and her husband who take care of them when they become elderly. Other married daughters and their husbands tend to live near the daughter’s parents’ house and usually do farming in the same field with her parents. Sometimes they get a smaller share than the youngest one, and some will even sell the field to the youngest one. Sons usually move to their wives’ villages and sometimes they get no share from their parents if they live far away. Therefore, some scholars argue that the Thai kinship structure is matrilineal and female-centered. See Sulamith Heins Potter, *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village: A Study in the Structural Significance of Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and MIZUNO Koichi, *Tai noson no shakai soshiki* [Social Structure of Thai Villages] (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1981).

²⁰ A. Thomas Kirsch, “Development and Mobility among the Phu Thai of Northeast Thailand,” *Asian Survey* 6, no. 7 (July 1966): 370–78; and A. Thomas Kirsch, “Text and Context: Buddhist Sex Roles/Culture of Gender Revisited,” *Ethnologist* 12, no. 2 (1985): 313–14.

²¹ In some northeastern Thai villages, many young male villagers have died over a period of time. Villagers tend to believe that is because of the attack from sexually voracious spirits known as “widow ghosts” (*phimaema*). Mills argues that this belief expresses anxieties about the destabilization of gender relations in rural society because of labor migration of women. Parents usually worry about the geographic mobility of their migrant daughters because of losing control over their labor, earnings, and even sexual behavior. See Mary Beth Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand,” in *Bewitching*

Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia, Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 244–73.

²² See Tomomi Ito, “Buddhist Women in Dhamma Practice in Contemporary Thailand: Movements Regarding their Status as World Renunciates,” *Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* 17 (1999): 152–55; and Tomomi Ito, “Gendai tai jyōzabukyō ni okeru jyosē no syamini syukke to bikuni jukai: rinen no apīru to katarenai genjitsu” [Thai Women’s Samaneri and Bhikkhuni Ordination in Contemporary Theravada Buddhism: Overt Rationale and Covert Reality], *Tōnan ajia: rekishi to bunka* [Southeast Asia: History and Culture] 38 (2009): 64–105.

²³ Penny Van Esterik, “Lay Women in Theravada Buddhism,” in *Women of Southeast Asia*, ed. Penny Van Esterik (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1982), 44–45. Some *maechis* are respected and invited to participate in or conduct religious events now, for example, during my fieldwork, sometimes I saw posters that advertised Maechi Sansanee’s participation in religious events. This change is parallel with the development of Yiguan Dao in Thailand. However, there are still some difficulties, as I discuss below.

²⁴ Ito, “Buddhist Women in Dhamma Practice in Contemporary Thailand,” 150. However, those views are contested by some who are *maechis* themselves. See Sid Brown, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even against the Wind* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²⁵ Monica Lindberg Falk, “Do Buddhist ‘Nuns’ Need the Thai Sangha?” In *Buddhism, Modernity, and the State in Asia: Forms of Engagement*, Pattana Kitiarsa and John Whalen-Bridge, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 229–44.

²⁶ See for details, Monica Lindberg Falk, “Women in Between: Becoming Religious Persons in Thailand,” in *Women’s Buddhism, Buddhism’s Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, Ellison Banks Findly, ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 37–57.

²⁷ The estimated numbers are around 12,000 in 2009. See Barbara Kameniar, “Thai Buddhist Women, ‘Bare Life’ and Bravery,” *Australian Religion Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2009): 283. Although there are increasing numbers of *maechis* in the *sammak chis* or nunneries where nuns are not housekeepers for monks, many *maechis* are still in traditional monasteries.

²⁸ Monica Lindberg Falk, “The Struggle for Recognition and Justice: Gender Inequality and Socially Engaged Buddhism in Thailand,” in *Gendered Inequalities in Asia: Configuring, Contesting and Recognizing Women and Men*, Helle Rydström, ed. (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), 150.

²⁹ For example, the lineage of Ubasika Ki Nanayon. See Ito, “Buddhist Women in Dhamma Practice in Contemporary Thailand,” 165–68.

³⁰ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is an influential reformist monk in Thailand with innovative interpretations of Buddhist doctrine. He founded a forest monastery named Suan Mokkh in southern Thailand, and attracted many Thai and international followers.

³¹ See for details, Tomomi Ito, “Dhammamātā: Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu’s Notion of Motherhood in Buddhist Women Practitioners,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (1999): 409–32.

³² *Khun Yai* literally means “Grandmother.” Her full title was Khun Yai Achan Mahā Ratana Upāsikā Chandra Khonnokyoong, meaning Great

Grandmother Master Chandra Khonnokyoong. Members also call her Khun Yai Achan Chandra Khonnokyoong, meaning Grandmother Master Chandra Khonnokyoong.

³³ Originally, this term meant “virtuous friends,” and referred to those who were able to teach the truth and instruct others in the good way. However, at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the term is usually used to refer to members who donate substantial amounts of money to support the monks. During events, announcers call out their names in turn and the monks chant blessings for them in particular.

³⁴ Above the rank of lay member (*yatiham*), the first two ranks, open to both men and women, are *akhantuka chon* and *akhantuka pracham*. Above this, the ranks for men are *aramik*, *pa*, *nak*, *samanutthet*, and finally, *samana*. The ranks for women are *aramika*, *pa*, *krak*, and finally, *sikkhamat*. See Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “The Status and Values of the Santi Asoke Sikkhamat,” in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream*, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed. (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 72–83; and Rory Mackenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Toward an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2007), 148–49.

³⁵ In contrast to Santi Asoke, whose renouncers are generally not recognized by the Thai Sangha, Wat Phra Dhammaka made great efforts to remain part of the main Maha Nikaya fraternity in the Thai Theravāda Buddhist Sangha. Therefore, they still follow the regulations of the Thai Sangha authorities.

³⁶ Heikkilä-Horn, “Status and Values of the Santi Asoke Sikkhamat,” also mentions that in Santi Asoke, because allowing the numbers of *sikkhamat* to increase might further infuriate mainstream monks who oppose Santi Asoke’s philosophy and practice of ordaining women, they keep the ratio at four monks to one *sikkhamat*. In 1995, there were 92 monks to 23 *sikkhamats*. She also mentions that although, theoretically, *sikkhamats* have the same status as novice monks, in practice the *sikkhamats* usually bow to the novices. During sermons, *sikkhamats* usually sit on the lower stage, in contrast to the monks, who sit on the elevated stage.

³⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums in the Politics of Thai Popular Religion,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 221–23.

³⁸ Falk, “Women in Between,” 37.

³⁹ Kameniar, “Thai Buddhist Women,” 281–94.

⁴⁰ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007); and Kameniar, “Thai Buddhist Women,” 292.

⁴¹ Tatsuki Kataoka, “Religion as Non-religion: The Place of Chinese Temples in Phuket, Southern Thailand,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 1, no. 3 (2012): 461–85.

⁴² Like Chinese temples or other new religious movements from abroad, Yiguan Dao is not recognized by the Thai state as “religion,” and most groups are registered as non-religious “charity foundations” (*mulanithi* in Thai).

⁴³ SHEN Yeh-ying, “Kundao yingyun: yiguan dao de nuxing guan” [The Rise of Female’s Era: Notions of Female Gender in Yiguan Dao], *Huaren zongjiao yanjiu* [Studies in Chinese Religions] 7 (2016): 175–98. She indicates two possible Buddhist sources for this idea. The first is the five imperfections of women, namely, their inability to control their bodies, homes, relationships, or objects, or to become a Buddha. Another is from the idea of the “five obstacles” (*wuzhang*

in Mandarin), meaning five obstructions to women's attainment. The view is that a woman cannot become a Brahma god, a Shakra [Indra] god, a devil king, a wheel-turning king, or a Buddha.

⁴⁴ Shen, "Kundao yingyun," 180–83.

⁴⁵ Shen, "Kundao yingyun," 177–80.

⁴⁶ This historical process in Yiguan Dao is different from Buddhism. In Buddhism, Maitreya Buddha, who is believed to be the next Buddha, will arrive only when the world is getting worse and worse, and the Dharma is no longer practiced.

⁴⁷ The masters *dianchuanishi*, or *achan thaithod boektham* in Thai, are the representatives of the Respectful Master (ZHANG Tianran). As representatives of the Respectful Master, they can host many important events such as initiation rituals. They must also teach the doctrines, or the truth, to other members.

⁴⁸ The criteria for bodhisattvas in Yiguan Dao are different from Buddhism. The main criteria for the former are not only how much one progresses in his or her own religious practices, but also how many people she or he either helps let know the truth and become Yiguan Dao members, or supports them to continue their religious practices. After the death of a qualified member, the gods in Yiguan Dao will confer on him or her the title bodhisattva (*pusa* in Mandarin), fairy goddess (*xianjun* in Mandarin), sacred emperor (*shengdi* in Mandarin), and so on, via spirit writing or channeling.

⁴⁹ For promotion, members should pass certain courses and exams, taking vegetarian vows, making other people become members, and finally verified by *dianchuanishi* (masters). For details, see Lin, "Tai ni okeru ikkandō," 197–200. And for example, in the regional group of Yiguan Dao where I did my study, in 2013 there are 21 *jiangshi* (lecturers, 13 are female and 8 are male) and 38 *jiangyuan* (assistant lecturer, 24 are female and 14 are male) which is under the supervision of one *dianchuanishi* (master, who is male). However, in the national level above this region, the most senior leader *dianchuanishi* (master) of this group is female. And above her, there are 3 masters from Taiwan, which 2 are female and 1 is male. Besides, the leader of this group in Taiwan is female.

⁵⁰ Although there have been female *arahats* in Buddhist history, the Yiguan Dao lecturer used the five hundred *arahats* gathering in the first Buddhist council to emphasize the difficulties of women's religious practice in Buddhism. According to the Buddhist tradition, there have been countless *arahats*.

⁵¹ Yiguan Dao developed a set of theories on "tests" (*kao* in Mandarin, *thodsob* in Thai), which means Yiguan Dao members will meet obstacles to train them on the spiritual path if the obstacles are overcome. One of them is the "test from the state," which refers to suppression from the state. During the early development of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan, many female leaders were arrested and/or imprisoned by the Kuomintang government. Therefore, the lecturer said those female leaders "shouldered the debts," or encountered the "test from the state," in place of other members. For details of such "tests," see Yunfeng LU, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 53–55.

⁵² Lin, "Tai ni okeru ikkandō," 193–209.

⁵³ Sung, *Tian Dao Gou Chen*, 234.

⁵⁴ Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts,” 244–73.

⁵⁵ In contrast, male overseas Thai migrant workers greatly outnumber female ones. See for details, Lin, “Yuanxing yu zuogongde.”

⁵⁶ For example see, Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts”; Kyonosuke Hirai, “Exhibition of Power: Factory Women’s Use of the Housewarming Ceremony in a Northern Thai Village,” in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes, eds. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press), 185–201.

⁵⁷ Kiso Keiko, “Tōhoku tai nōson ni okeru idōrōdō to jyosē wo meguru kihan: 1970 nendai ikō no jyosē no idōrōdō no tenkai wo tōshite” [Labor Migration and the Norms Regarding Women in Northeast Thailand: Transitions in Women’s Labor Migration since the 1970s], *Tai kenkyū* [The Journal of Thai Studies] 7 (2007): 55–78.

⁵⁸ Literally, *qian dao* and *kun dao* mean the way of *yang* and the way of *yin*. *Qian* and *Kun* are two symbols of the *Bagua* (eight trigrams). *Qian* is equal to pure *yang*, and *Kun* is equal to pure *yin*. Therefore, in Yiguan Dao, members use *Qian* to symbolize male members, and *Kun* to symbolize female members. Thai members also use the same Mandarin terms to refer to male and female members.

⁵⁹ Yiguan Dao members call each other “dharma relatives.” The term refers to the fact that such “dharma relatives” practice the dharma (truth) together and are all, in a religious sense, children of the Eternal Mother.

⁶⁰ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 313–60.

⁶¹ Shen, “Kundao yingyun.”

⁶² Bernard Formoso, *De Jiao: A Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas: Purple Qi from the East* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010); and SHIGA Ichiko, “Kindai kanton ni okeru sentendō no kōryū to tōnan ajia chiiki e no tenkai: chyōsyū kara tai e no denpa to tekiō wo chyūshin ni” [The Rise and Development of the Great Way of Former Heaven in Modern Guangdong and Southeast Asia: Focusing on Its Diffusion and Adaptation from Chaozhou to Thailand], *Ibaraki Kirisutokyō Daigaku Kiyō I, Jinbun Kagaku* [Journal of Ibaraki Christian College, I. Humanities] 44 (2010): 145–62. Other new overseas Chinese Buddhist religious groups, such as Tzu Chi, are also usually related to the Chinese diaspora. For example see, C. Julia HUANG, “Zongjiao kuaguo kuaguo zongjiao: taiwan ciji de kuaguo zhuyi chutan” [Diasporic Bodhisattvas: The Religious Transnationalism of Taiwan’s Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation], in *Liuzhuan kuajie: Taiwan de kuaguo, kuaguo de Taiwan* [To Cross or Not to Cross: Transnational Taiwan, Taiwan’s Transnationality], WANG Hongzen and GUO Pei-yi, eds. (Taipei: Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies, Academia Sinica, 2009), 73–103.