

2008 Penny Magee Memorial Lecture

Thai Buddhist Women, 'Bare Life' and Bravery*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ambiguous position of the largest group of Buddhist renunciant women in Thailand today, the *mae chii*. It provides a brief historical overview of the position of renunciant women in Buddhism more generally before taking up the case of the *mae chii*. While the *mae chii* are often represented as subordinate women who are suppressed by the current legal and religious systems in Thailand, this paper attempts to offer a different reading of their current position through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*. The paper draws on research literature and interviews undertaken in 2007 and 2008 to make the case that it is possible to not only see 'mae chii' as a submissive category but as a subversive one too.

Introduction

Feminist debates on ordination within Buddhism have often centred on the religious and social consequences for women of denying them full access to the monastic *Sangha*. In this address I consider the case of the *mae chii* in contemporary Thailand. The precise origin and meaning of the word *chii*—or as it is sometimes written *ji*—is not known. Kabil Singh

* I would like to thank the AASR and the Women's Caucus for inviting me to give the 2008 Penny Magee Memorial Lecture. It is a great honour to be able to give the lecture because Penny was one of my teachers during my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. It was Penny who first suggested I begin to study the lives of the *mae chii* and I continue to thank her for that and the gift of scholarship she shared with me.

(1991: 36) suggests it may date back as far as the sixth century BCE to the Jain *Svetambara* sect which was called ‘white-cloth *ji*’ in Thai language. The very poor social and material conditions of the *mae chii* are frequently highlighted in ordination debates. In their own terms, the *mae chii* have issues. However, they are also a group whose experiences are used instrumentally by others in colonial cultural contexts. In this paper, I examine the position of the *mae chii* in Thai Buddhism from an historical perspective. I engage Giorgio Agamben’s reading of *homo sacer* (1998) and ‘state of exception’ (2005) to examine the ambiguous position of the *mae chii* as persons who exist as exiles in religious and State law before arguing that even while the *mae chii* are excluded from full religious and State obligations and rights, their position as *homo sacer* gives them an identity through which they can, and do, provide social, political, religious and cultural critique and action. Through engaging the notion of *homo sacer*, I hope to signal the importance of attending to more than just the religious status of women in Thailand, particularly if one is concerned with the position of women in Thai Buddhism and Thai society more generally. Full citizenship is not just a matter of symbolism derived through religious status and identity. It is also a matter of material access, a matter of law and a matter of social recognition that must, most importantly, come from outside the monastic *Sangha*.

I commence this paper by providing some background to the *mae chii* and their current legal and social status in Thailand. I then outline Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer* and explain why it might be a helpful lens through which to reinterpret the position of *mae chii* in contemporary times. I draw on data taken from interviews in 2007 and 2008 to illustrate how many *mae chii* refuse to subordinate themselves to the territorialising biopolitical Thai State and the official *Sangha* and how this refusal opens up the possibility of re-imagining what it means to be a Buddhist in contemporary Thailand.

Thai Renunciant Women—Now and Then

The *mae chii* are the most numerous group of Thai Buddhist renunciant women. They wear white, shave their heads and eyebrows and keep eight precepts: to abstain from killing living beings; to abstain from taking what has not been given; to abstain from sexual activity; to abstain from lying speech; to abstain from drinking liquor or taking anything that may intoxicate the mind; to abstain from eating after noon; to abstain from watching dancing, singing, shows and from adorning oneself; to abstain from using a high bed. Precise numbers of *mae chii* are not known because no centralised or official records are kept outside of a register at

the Thai Nun's Institute at Wat Bowon in Bangkok. The Thai Nun's Institute was formed in 1969 after Thai representatives at an International Buddhist Association meeting recognised that the *mae chii* lacked representation as well as any form of organisation. The Institute was established to help provide educational and spiritual support for the *mae chii* and also to regulate practices so as to raise their status. However, not all *mae chii* are members of the Institute and the actual number may be twice as many as are registered. Current numbers are estimated to be around 12,000.

The *mae chii* have tended to live in or around some Buddhist temples, or *wat*, where they perform a variety of roles related to the upkeep of the monks, including cooking and cleaning. In some *wat* with progressive abbots and large numbers of *mae chii* they might also be found assisting in the teaching of meditation practices to the laity and providing support in basic *dharma* teaching. Increasingly *mae chii* can also be found in independent 'nunneries' or *samnak chii* (Falk 2000: 40) where they undertake domestic duties, grow crops, practice meditation, undertake studies in the *dharma* and, increasingly, provide teaching in the *dharma* and meditation to lay Buddhists. There are also a small number of high-profile *mae chii* such as Mae Chii Sansanee who, because of their personal wealth, live independent lives in relative luxury, undertake acts of charity, engage in teaching and provide social commentary. In recent times a number of *mae chii* have completed higher degrees. At least two of these *mae chii* lecture at each of the Buddhist Universities in Bangkok and a number also lecture at Mahapajapati Theri Wittayalai, a tertiary institution for *mae chii* in the Pakthongchai area of Nakhon Ratchisima province. There are also other women like Mae Chii Pairor Thipayathasana who became a *mae chii* after having completed a PhD and working in business and academia.

The *mae chii* are not ordained and cannot be considered to be *bhikkhunis* or Buddhist nuns. In spite of this they are usually referred to as 'Thai nuns'. Becoming a *mae chii* is a peculiarly Thai response to what it means to be a Buddhist woman given that the official *Sangha* position on *bhikkhunis* is that they have never existed in Thailand, cannot be found in Theravada Buddhism (having died out many centuries ago) and will never exist in Thailand because of the rule that a *bhikkhuni* needs to be ordained by both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* (Kameniar 1993, 2007). This position persists in spite of a strong argument that an unbroken lineage does indeed exist and the fact that decisions have been made to reinstate *bhikkhuni* ordination in other Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka and Korea. The difficulties Thai Buddhism has had in finding a legitimate place for women within the official *Sangha* has its roots in the development of Thailand as a nation.

Buddhism, and other aspects of Indian civilisation are said to have entered the region we now know as Thailand as early as the first century of the Christian era. By the end of the fourth century, the region was said to be 'thoroughly Indianized' (Robinson and Johnson 1977: 134). This notion of Indianisation is important because at that time the Hindu 'Laws of Manu' provided a key reference for gender relations and these laws positioned women as always subordinate to men (Kabilsingh 1991; Kameniar 1993). However, the origin of the Thai Buddhist State is said to be the beginning of the Sukhothai period which began in 1253. According to Kabilsingh (1991: 2), there is no separate mention of Buddhist women from that period.

It is not until the capital was moved from Sukhothai to Ayutthya in 1350 that records begin to appear of women renunciants closely resembling the *mae chii*. Most of these records come in the form of descriptions given by male Western travellers and do not emerge until the 1600s. In 1636 Schouten reported:

Besides these Priests, there are a sort of old Nuns shorn, lodged in Chappels near the greatest Temples, who assist very devoutly in all their preachings, singings, ceremonies, and other Church services, but all voluntary, being tied to no rules or prescriptions (cited in Terweil 1975: 259).

Just over fifty years later, Gervaise (1688) also wrote of women who shaved their heads and eyebrows and wore white garments. He, like Schouten, noted that they took no vows but that they 'enjoy the same privileges as the monks and they bow to none except the priests and pagodas' (cited in Cook 1981: 40).

La Loubère, whose report on Siam was first published in English in 1693, said of the women he encountered:

Though at Siam there are some *Talapoinesses* [i.e. nuns], or Women, who in most things do observe the Rule of the *Talapoins* [i.e. monks or *bhikkus*], yet they have no other Convents [i.e. *wat* or temple complex] than those of the *Talapoins* themselves. The Siamese do think that the advanced Age of all these women, for there is none young, is a sufficient caution of their Chastity. There are not *Talapoinesses* in all the Convents: but in those where any are, their Cells run along one of the sides of the Bambou Inclosure, which I have mentioned, without being otherwise separated from those of the *Talapoins* (La Loubère 1969: 113).

La Loubère (1969: 119) also notes that these women 'call themselves *Nang Tchii*' and 'are not esteemed altogether Religious'. Schouten, Gervaise and La Loubère all attest to the presence of renunciant women who wear white during the seventeenth century in Thailand. Where Schouten and Gervaise report that the women take no vows and live near temples, La Loubère reports that they observe the rules of the monks 'in

most things' and live inside the temples. It is difficult to draw conclusions as to why the reports differ. The answer may simply be that the authors experienced different *wat*, or there may have been changes over time. What is clear is that women renunciants were in existence at least during the latter part of the Ayutthya period; that they were situated near, if not in, *wat* compounds; that they were generally well regarded; and that they were generally old—although this trend seems to be confused slightly by a report of La Loubère (1969: 119) that if the *Talapoinesses* behaved badly they were delivered up to their parents for punishment.

After a series of rebellions and struggles against the Burmese who invaded the region during the latter part of the Ayutthya period, a third capital was established at Thonburi in 1767 under the reign of Tak Sin. During his short reign Tak instituted many reforms in an attempt to purify, renew and strengthen the *Sangha*. In 1782 King Yod Fa dethroned Tak and established his new capital in Bangkok, Thonburi's sister city. King Yod Fa is known as King Rama I and it is the dynasty he established which reigns in Thailand today, the present king being the ninth member of it.

King Rama I also set about revitalising and reforming the *Sangha* and, from 1783, each *bhikkhu* was under much stricter disciplinary and organisational control. A *bhikkhu* had to be attached to a monastery and be under the supervision of a more senior *bhikkhu*. Among the many laws and rules that King Rama I instituted to ensure appropriate conduct towards and respect for the *Sangha*, there is only one specific reference to the conduct of women renunciants—the *chii*. The word *mae* means mother in Thai. They are instructed not to live near or in any of the *wat* (Cook 1981: 41). This was a manoeuvre to establish control over the *bhikkhus* and the *chiis* removal from the *wat* was instrumental in this. However, the fact that the *chii* were used instrumentally signals a great deal about their position at that time. During the reign of King Rama II (1809–24) reports from Western travellers again make mention of the *chii*. Crawford reports in 1828 that '*chii* are not well respected'; Pallegoix notes in 1854 that they 'have to recite their prayers with their backs turned' and can be expelled for misconduct (cited in Cook 1981: 40).

The British diplomat John Bowring, who visited Siam in 1855 to negotiate and conclude a Treaty with King Rama IV (Mongkut, who further reformed the *Sangha* and established the *Thammayutika* sect), reported of the *chii* in the following way:

There is a body of female devotees called *Nang-xi*, who are dedicated to the services of the pagodas. They are a sort of nuns, wearing white dresses, and are allowed to collect alms for themselves, and for the temples to which they belong. They have their prayers to recite and their services to perform (Bowring 1969: vol. 1, 334).

His report of the *chii* tends to be little more than descriptive, but the mention of them collecting alms for themselves and the *wat* to which they belong tells us that by 1855 the *chii* were again living in or near the *wat*.

Despite the fact that *chii* have existed in Thailand for at least three hundred years, they have received little attention from official bodies in Thailand. Kabilsingh notes that as late as 1991 the Department of Religious Affairs, although possessing detailed records on the monks, novices and even *dek wat*, or temple boys, in each temple, still make no mention of the *mae chii*; however, general census figures are available (1991: 38). Part of the reason for the Department of Religious Affairs not keeping detailed records on the *mae chii* seems to lie in their ambiguous religious status (Cook 1981).

‘Women in Between’

The position of the *mae chii* has varyingly been described as ‘ambiguous’ (Cook 1981), ‘[m]arginalized, undereducated’ (Kabilsingh 1991: 39) and ‘underprivileged’ (Falk 2007: 251). They have often been represented, in colonial and patriarchal terms as always and everywhere poor, uneducated and submissive. In 1982 Penny Van Esterik stated that the ‘*mae chii* may be viewed as failures, outcasts, or eccentrics’ (1982: 74). This view of the *mae chii* persists among many Thais today.

In an interview in 2008, one *mae chii* told me that her family was initially extremely disapproving of her decision to become a *mae chii* some 15 years ago:

My family never accept me. They don't want me to be a nun and shave my hair and have white clothes. You have a bad reputation [if you become a nun]. It is nothing good. But if it is a son, it is okay. My friend, my sister-in-law said ‘you are a parasite of society. You have a good education. You have good work’. She means this in a material way. They think like that. My friend say ‘It is a waste of the economy. You never do anything. You just meditate and close your eyes like that’. But eventually my mother, she got it. She said, ‘just only this daughter never comes to bother me. Money, no! Wife, husband, children, no! [She] never comes to the family to be a headache’.

The *mae chii*'s ambiguous religious and legal status within Thailand has led to State policies relevant to them, when they do exist, being inconsistent. For example, the Interior Ministry bars them from voting because they are categorised as clerics for that purpose. But other state agencies legally regard them as lay women. Monica Lindberg Falk (2000: 42) describes their situation as follows:

The government gives support to the monks with free education, free medical care, and free or reduced fares for buses and trains. Nuns do not receive such support from the government because of their official status as laity. However, the same government denies *mae chii* the right to vote in public elections, citing their ascetic status and renunciation of worldly matters.

Ideas for a number of different Bills that relate to the legal and religious status of the *mae chii* have been proposed over the last twelve years. Some of these attempts have been made on behalf of the *mae chii*, even though others have not involved any consultation with them. The distinguished *mae chii*, the late Venerable Mae Chii Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen, who had been a women's rights activist for many years before becoming a *mae chii*, was one of those who attempted to gain legal recognition for them. Her work on a Mae Chii's Bill commenced in 1996. Through the Bill she hoped to have the *mae chii* legally recognised as religious persons as well as increase their access to education and provide them with greater financial security (Falk 2007: 227-26). Against many obstacles she steered a path that involved considerable consultation. However, she died before seeing the Bill rejected in 2003. Falk (2007: 236) writes about the outcome in the following way:

My informants had the impression that the Department of Religious Affairs was unsure of what implications the Mae Chiis' Bill would have. A long time had passed since they submitted the proposed Mae Chiis' Bill and there was no longer any constant pressure from the *mae chiis* on the Department of Religious Affairs to deal with. At the time of the decision Mae Chii Khunying Kanitha was dead. She had been the one who had had the influential contacts at the department. The *bhikkhuni* issue was under debate at the same time, and my informants said that the department probably got 'cold feet' and decided to reject the Mae Chiis' Bill.

Some attempts at providing legal recognition for the *mae chii* have come from within the official *Sangha* without any consultation with the *mae chii*. The most recent attempt to define the legal status of the *mae chii* came from within the *Sangha*. In early 2008 the Office of National Buddhism sponsored a Bill that, among other things, would settle the legal position of the *mae chii*. When I arrived at the Thai Nun's Institute in June 2008 an emergency meeting had been called to discuss the proposed Bill. According to the *Bangkok Post* journalist and feminist Buddhist author Sanitsuda Ekachai, the *mae chii* were not consulted about the Bill and what emerged when the Bill was made public was that the *mae chii* were only to be given the status of *upasikas*—devout laywomen. Ekachai (2008) wrote about the Bill in the following way:

Any mae chee [sic] or white-robed nun who believes she will get legal status as a monastic member under new legislation pushed by the elders will be in for a big disappointment. No, the nuns will not get any legal status as clerics. That is crystal clear in the Support and Protection for Buddhism draft bill. Worse, any freedom they enjoy now will be clipped. Don't blame the nuns if they feel betrayed. It is a well-known fact that our home-grown mae chee have long suffered lack of support for their spiritual pursuits, being primarily treated as temple hands. They must have welcomed the change when the Office of National Buddhism announced that it was sponsoring a bill that would recognise nuns as clerics and support their drama work. Who can blame their optimism? Amnart Buasiri from the Ecclesiastical Council Secretariat himself said the bill would make the nuns *nak buat* or clerics. But truth be told, the draft bill does not define the nuns as clerics. The mae chee, it says, are practising Buddhist laywomen or *upasika* who wear white robes, shave their heads, observe eight precepts and live a homeless life. And although the draft bill will not recognise the mae chee's work, however, the clergy wants nothing of it. The draft bill clearly stipulates that this is the government's duty, not the clergy's. Wonder why many women seek the path of Bhikkhuni? Or why many prefer to engage in dharma work independently? Before the setting up of the Nuns Institute, a self-regulated body, the nuns were under the clergy's paralysing control which chained them to temple kitchens, said senior mae chee Arun Pet-urai. Her call for clarification of mae chee's rights in the new structure does not only echo her peer's concerns, it also shows they have not been consulted at all. Talk about lack of respect. Interestingly, the elders draft bill does not mention the Nuns Institute at all. The nun's it says must be under direct control of the clergy. Get the picture? If the nuns get a poor deal in the Support and Protection for Buddhism draft bill, it is because the clergy's principal goal is not about justice but power. Out of the 43 articles, only one is about the mae chee. The full control of the mae chee, to be exact. The rest is about getting the government to pay for the clergy's propagation work and to protect them from perceived threats—particularly the mass media. It is a watered-down version of the same draft bill which was rejected by the National Legislative Assembly last year. Remember its controversial clause on monks' sexual misconduct which punished only women, not the monks? This clause has been removed. But the rest is more of the same, although legal punishment has been reduced... The message is clear. The clergy owns the teachings, the rituals, the icons, the sites. They alone can reap the benefits. For accuracy, this draft bill should be called the support and Protection of the Clergy, not Buddhism. For clearly this is but a case of abusing Buddhism for clique power.

In spite of the various proposals, the *mae chii* continue to function as women who are simultaneously inside and outside the *Sangha* as well as inside and outside lay life. They remain 'women in between' (Falk 2000: 37). It is this between-ness, this ambiguity in religious and State law, that first led me to consider whether Agamben's reading of *homo sacer* and the state of exception might provide a new lens through which to interpret the position of the *mae chii* in Thai Buddhism and how they might bear witness to the position of women more broadly in Thai society.

Homo Sacer, Bare Life and Thai Mae Chii

Agamben commences *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* by distinguishing between two terms used to express what the Greeks meant by the word 'life': *zoe*, which expresses 'the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, man, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group', that is, not a 'simple natural life but rather a qualified life' (Agamben 1998: 1). He then discusses Foucault's theorisation of the modern nation-state as a 'state of population' that uses a series of technologies to monitor and control the nation's biological life which becomes a problem of sovereign power. Agamben (1998: 9) writes:

[...] what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoe* in the *polis*...nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.

Bare life, which Agamben names *homo sacer* or 'sacred man', is human life reduced to matter and placed under a sovereign ban, 'excluded by and from judicial law' (Pratt 2005: 1054). *Homo sacer* is the opposite of sovereign power, standing at the point of indistinction between violence and the law (Agamben 1998: 10). For Agamben, *homo sacer* is the ideal-type of the excluded being. *Homo sacer* is one whose life is so devoid of value that s/he can be killed with impunity. However, while s/he might be killed, *homo sacer* cannot be used in religious sacrifice. That is, while the power of life can be taken from her/him, the one who takes that life receives no-thing in return as might be expected when a religious sacrifice is offered.

According to Pratt (2005: 1054), 'the one who is [excluded or] abandoned remains in a relationship with sovereign power: included through exclusion. It is thus "impossible to say clearly whether that which has been banned is inside or outside the juridical order"' (Mills 2004: 44)'. That is, it is possible to have the appearance of being included even while one is banned or abandoned. According to Agamben, abandonment is not the same as exclusion because abandonment is a relational and active term. This is indeed the case with the *mae chii*.

Through the maintenance of their ambiguous religious and legal position, the *mae chii* are not excluded from the *Sangha* but rather they are

abandoned by it. This was evident in the 2008 Draft Bill in which the official *Sangha* sought to abandon the *mae chii* through identifying them as *upasika* while simultaneously naming them as inside the *Sangha* through the use of the same term. It was also evident in a story told to me this year by a *mae chii* from a *samnak chii* at the edge of the jungle a few kilometres from Mahapajapati Theri Wittayalai. This *mae chii* told the story of how, after living in the forest for over 20 years, the group of *mae chii* with whom she lived decided to register their *samnak chii* with the local authorities. While waiting for the official to return with the necessary papers they noticed a file, with photos on the front, sitting on the official's desk. The photos looked familiar. Turning the file around, they realised that the photos were of their *samnak chii*. When the official returned they asked who had taken the photos and why he had them. The official explained that a local monk had recently applied to establish a *wat* on the land where their *samnak chii* was situated. He had brought in photos of the area and told the officials that one of the reasons why the land was so suitable was because there were already a number of existing structures in which 'his' *mae chii* dwelt. According to the story he told, the *mae chii* were his followers and had given consent to having the *samnak chii* incorporated into the *wat*. The officials had accepted his story because they had no reason to doubt it and didn't think it was necessary to check the veracity of his story with the *mae chii*. However, the *mae chii* knew nothing of the monk, had never met him and were disturbed that he, or someone else, had managed to take photographs of the *samnak chii* and attempt to register it as their own without them knowing. The government official accepted their story and they were granted ownership over the land they occupied. While the story is disturbing for what it reveals about the ways in which a particular member of the male clergy in Thailand felt he could use the *mae chii* and claim ownership over their property, their loyalties and their will, it also reveals something about the ways in which the *mae chii* are not altogether without recourse, power and agency even though they do not have religious and legal recognition. And this is precisely Agamben's point. It is possible to be placed under sovereign ban and also, simultaneously, refuse assimilation.

In an interview in 2008, Ekachai stated that she did not believe legal recognition or even official religious recognition was what was needed by the *mae chii*. According to her, while legal recognition may be a good thing at one level, it is also highly problematic because laws are always designed by those who have established power and one must subordinate oneself to that power to receive recognition from it. Ekachai (2008) noted:

Theoretically legal recognition is good but it is problematic because legal recognition always comes from above...defined and designed by the clergy and that doesn't fit the nuns' needs. So if that is where it comes from I don't think the nuns need that kind of legal recognition because they can operate by themselves naturally more independently the way that they are doing now.

For Ekachai, the most important form of recognition that must occur is recognition at the social level—'they need [social recognition] much, much more and [to achieve this they will] need to break their own barriers. They tend to work within themselves. They tend to be shy to work with the public'. The *mae chii* who have responsibility for the curriculum at Mahapajapati Theri Wittayalai have recognised the importance of this and offer, among other things, the opportunity for the young *mae chii* who study there to develop their public speaking skills and their knowledge of *dharma* and practice so they can begin to teach and work with the laity.

Ekachai described the *mae chii* as 'a grassroots movement' that appealed to many Thai women because the *mae chii* tend to ask for recognition rather than demand it and they work in 'humble, subtle, patient ways which [ironically] simultaneously allows them to be suppressed by the authorities'. Ekachai said she believed that the *mae chii* are not concerned with notions of equality, that 'they don't want to act as equal to monks' but rather, they seek more opportunity. She said that one of the strengths of the movement at the moment is that it provides a great deal of space for difference and it is able to do this because of the ambiguous position of the *mae chii* in Thai Buddhism.

Conclusion

So can the *mae chii*'s status as *homo sacer*, 'bare life' in Thai Buddhism help us re-imagine Thai Buddhist community? If one follows Geraldine Pratt's (2005: 1069) discussion of 'Vancouver's Missing Women' as a means for re-imagining political community through two limit concepts used by Agamben—that is, 'the human so degraded as to exist beyond conventional humanist ethics of respect, dignity and responsibility' and the 'one and only figure of the refugee'—then it might be possible to do so. Pratt's discussion focuses mainly on the refugee. She notes:

The importance of this figure is that it severs the connection between personhood and the nation-state, a link that is forged in liberal societies through the concept of the citizen and territorialisation of individual rights within the nation-state. The figure of the refugee who refuses assimilation is of one who refuses to submit their personhood to the territorializing biopolitical state.

If the way forward for the *mae chii* is through the figure of the refugee who refuses assimilation then Sanitsuda Ekachai may be right. The way forward is not through inclusive exclusion in oppressive laws, but rather through refusing assimilation and submission of personhood to the territorialising biopolitical state and official *Sangha*. 'Agamben asks us to think about political strategy in other terms because seeking inclusion as citizens does nothing to disrupt a political community based on a process of abandonment. Agamben urges the need to imagine fully political subjects outside of and beyond specifically liberal notions of citizenship' (Pratt 2005: 1069-70). For the *mae chii* this might mean a continual struggle of resistance to draft laws that curb their autonomy while they also work to strengthen their networks with one another to create a loose form of solidarity when advocating for rights to education, health and better living conditions.

It is possible to not only see '*mae chii*' as a submissive category but as a subversive one too because it is a subject position that confounds any attempt to fix it. As such it becomes a category or subject position of potential rather than of submission or obedience. However, as Ekachai noted, this can only happen in the geographic space of a *samnak chii*. It is not possible for any *mae chii* to operate in this way while relying on the good will of a *bhikkhu* or monk as so many of those who currently reside in *wat* do. According to Geraldine Pratt, 'geographies do more than contain or localise bare life. Geographies are part of the process by which certain individuals and groups are reduced to bare life' (2005: 1055). The geographies of the *wat* produce the *mae chii* as *homo sacer*. Therefore, it is vital the *mae chii* are able to establish their own, independent spaces in which to practice if that is what they should choose. Ekachai concurs with this view, arguing that it is only in the space of a *samnak chii* that women can begin to refuse assimilation and submission and begin to negotiate a path outside of externally imposed oppressive structures.

I recall the laughter of the *mae chii* who had told me the story of the *bhikkhu* who had claimed the *mae chii* with whom she lived were his followers and tried to register their *samnak chii* as his own, when I suggested to her that perhaps the *mae chii*, as *homo sacer*, who lived their lives in a state of exception, provided an example for Buddhism to follow into the future. The laughter with which she responded to the suggestion was that of a deep joy at having heard someone else describe what she knew—as a *mae chii* she was independent, neither inside nor outside the official *Sangha*. Always at risk but never quite! It was this between-ness that kept her mind alert and helped her follow what she understood as the path of Buddhist practice. To have it put to her that perhaps the *mae chii* are incredibly brave women who embody the

possibility for a future Buddhism was an affirmation of aspects of what she believed she was living. As a daughter of the Buddha she did not accept the oppressive chains of a legal system that had no relevance to her except when someone tried to utilise it in ways that placed the *sammak chii* where she resided at risk and even then she knew it was possible to resist.

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