Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies, 2024, 13(2): 27–47

The Participation and the Role of Female Lay Buddhists in Malaysia: A Case Study

Siew-Boon Lew*

To cite this article: Siew-Boon Lew (2024). The Participation and the Role of Female Lay Buddhists in Malaysia: A Case Study. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies 13*(2): 27–47. http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202412_13(2).0002
To link to this article: http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202412_13(2).0002

Abstract

Since the arrival of Chinese immigrants in Malaysia in the 1850s, Buddhist temples have been established in the towns where they have settled down. Today, Chinese women are actively participating in Buddhist activities and hold important roles in Buddhist organisations. Hitherto, research on Buddhist women has historically focused on China while there is limited attention to the role of women in Buddhist organisations in Malaysia. This study is an attempt to contribute research on role of lay Buddhist women in Malaysia, with a special focus on the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge (CBL). Drawing upon personal interviews, sources in newspapers and existing literature, the study will delve into female participation in Malaysian Buddhist organisations to supplement previous research on the subject. The CBL is recognised as one of the leading lay Buddhist organisations in Malaysia, distinguished by its substantial membership and well-structured organisational framework. Its female members take on significant responsibilities in diverse forms of volunteer activities. This study is intended to offer valuable insights into the broader landscape of women's participation in religious activities in Malaysia.

Keywords: Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, Buddhist view of women, female volunteer activities, female empowerment

Introduction

A lay Buddhist is a person who is not a monk or a nun. In China, the term may refer to a person of virtue and talent who chooses to lead a reclusive life. In general, it may also refer to a "scholar who lives at home" (戴圣/Dai Sheng, Han Dynasty). After Buddhism was introduced to China, the term was used more broadly refer to individuals who lead reclusive lives, to lay Buddhist practitioners, or all non-monastic followers of Buddhism. In the compassionate spirit of Buddhism, anyone who does not oppose or threaten Buddhism — regardless of their personal beliefs — may be considered a layman (Pan, 2000a). In ancient China, the majority of Buddhist laymen were wealthy individuals who actively supported and believed in Buddhism. In general, the term implied one who possessed enough wealth to financially support Buddhism, and who practised Buddhism at home in a personal capacity. In essence, modern lay Buddhist groups are predominantly upper- and middle-class individuals, including prominent figures in politics, the military, celebrities, and intellectuals, though persons from the middle and lower classes are not entirely excluded (Pan, 2000a).

Although the religious participation of Malaysian women has been less discussed in past research, several recent studies on Chinese communities in other countries have started to address this issue, with a focus on women's roles in religious life. These scholarships increasingly recognise the intersections of gender, religion, and social dynamics in Chinese society, highlighting the unique contributions and roles of women in these contexts. Kang (2009) examines how temple revitalisation provides elderly Chinese women in Sichuan with social roles and autonomy in the expanding market economy of rural areas. Similarly, M. H. Yang (2020) explores how religious sisterhood offers women communal support and challenges gender boundaries by facilitating both public and private exchanges of resources. In another study, Kang (2017) addresses the gendered dimensions of religious modernisation, illustrating how male elites used women's education and gender equality as part of their nationalist reform efforts, often aligning religious practices with male-dominated ideologies. Julia Huang (2008) investigates how women within Taiwan's Tzu Chi movement leverage religious devotion to navigate and redefine cultural constraints on gender roles. Kuah (2015) examines Buddhist volunteerism among Chinese women, demonstrating how it fosters empowerment, social visibility, and community engagement through a feminist lens. Jessup (2010) provides a historical perspective on urban Buddhist activism, showing how elite lay Buddhists used civic engagement to establish moral authority and social legitimacy. These studies reveal how religious engagement allows Chinese women to navigate and transform gender roles to gain public presence and agency in both local and broader societal contexts.

This study examines the participation and roles of lay Buddhist women in Malaysia to compare their social engagement with findings from earlier studies. Attention is focused on the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge (CBL) which is one of Malaysia's prominent lay Buddhist organisations and where

women play substantial volunteer and community roles in different capacities. The aim is to gain valuable insights into women participation in religious activities in Malaysia through an examination of their contributions to the events and ceremonies of the CBL.

Lay Buddhist Culture in Malaysian Chinese History

While both Hinayana and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism were introduced into China, it was the Mahayana version that developed rapidly, largely due to the characteristics of ancient Chinese society and its humanistic background. Chinese Buddhism integrated the traditional Confucian spirit with the Mahayana concept of salvation, creating a more secular and accessible belief system. This approach to lay Buddhist practice became the most effective and widespread method of propagation. In East and Southeast Asia, countries such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were among the earliest to adopt Chinese Buddhism. In these countries, lay Buddhism also flourished, as they shared a broad social foundation and cultural background similar to that of China (Pan, 2000a).

The earliest form of lay Buddhist groups in modern China was the "Buddhist Society," founded in Beijing in 1914, followed by the "Buddha Light Society," established in Zhejiang in 1918. These modern associations closely resembled traditional Dharma societies, adhering to similar forms and content without significant departures from traditional norms. In 1918, the World Buddhist Layman Group was founded in Shanghai and became the largest and most influential lay Buddhist organisation in China. In 1921, it was renamed the World Buddhist Householder Group. By 1923, the Shanghai Buddhist Pure Land Society was established as a specialised venue for lay practitioners to perform recitation.

Over time, the gradual development and improvement of the organisation were made with the establishment of departments for sutra lectures, charitable work, prayers, meditation, and research. At its peak, the association had over 3,000 registered members. Under the leadership of the World Buddhist Householder Group, similar groups were founded in other parts of China and resulted in the significant increase in their membership and influence (Pan, 2000a).

In modern China, amid internal struggles and external threats, Western religious and cultural trends were introduced alongside Western colonialism and imperialism. During this period of change and turmoil, Buddhism faced unprecedented challenges. On the one hand, the collapse of imperial rule removed direct government support for Buddhism and traditional religions had to become self-sustaining. On the other hand, the influx of Western knowledge in the natural sciences and humanities meant that traditional religions, including Buddhism, had to reform to adapt to the rapidly changing social environment. Additionally, the rise of anti-superstition and anti-religion movements, along with efforts to repossess temple properties to fund education, raised alarm within the Buddhist community (X. R. Yang, 2004).

In response, many enlightened figures dedicated themselves to the cause of Buddhist revival. They broke away from traditional ideas, reformed the Buddhist system, and embraced new global knowledge to create a form of Buddhism that could meet the demands of the new era. The cultural activities of modern lay Buddhist groups primarily focused on four key areas: firstly, studying Buddhism: researching Buddhist philosophy, creating Buddhist works, and promoting the modernisation of Buddhist studies. Secondly, disseminating Buddhist ideas: promoting Buddhist teachings and culture through activities such as engraving sutras and publishing Buddhist literature. Thirdly, engaging in charitable work: organising disaster relief, medical aid, and educational initiatives, with lay Buddhist groups serving as the core of these efforts. Lastly, promoting "pure land" Buddhism: continuing to use Pure Land practices as a way to socialise and spread Buddhist beliefs (Pan, 2000b).[1]

The most significant contribution of upper-class lay Buddhism, particularly among the intellectual class, lies not in religious belief itself, but in the rational understanding and transformation of Buddhism through the lens of traditional Chinese culture (Pan, 2000b). According to the prominent scholar Yu Ying-shih (1987: 4) noted that "Confucius, emerging from a unique tradition in Chinese culture, represents the archetype of the 'scholar.' He possessed a rational side, though he was not a philosopher who 'meditated in silence.' He also had a sense of religious mission, but was distinct from a religious leader claiming to carry out God's will to save the world."

By the end of the 19th century, the overseas Chinese community had witnessed a substantial growth in both economic influence and national awareness. Additionally, with the spread of the Chinese language and the establishment of Chinese-language newspapers, Chinese overseas exhibited a growing desire for religious beliefs that could satisfy their spiritual needs beyond the traditional folk beliefs, which they perceived as offering only blessings and safety in temples. In this context, Mahayana Buddhism first emerged in Penang, where the overseas Chinese community was relatively concentrated (Xu, 1990).

In 1889, the Chinese community in Penang initiated the fundraising campaign for the construction of the Kek Lok Si Temple. In 1898, Singapore also constructed its first Buddhist temple, the Shuanglin Temple. Subsequently, the number of Buddhist temples in Singapore and Malaysia increased Buddhist temples when the main towns erected their own temples to meet the spiritual needs of their growing Chinese population. The most notable of these can be found in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur, demonstrated a keen awareness of the challenges facing the countries in which they lived. In 1947, a considerable number of individuals were displaced from post-war Singapore and Malaysia. At times of distress such as during the Japanese Occupation between 1941 and 1945 or in the event of natural or man-made disasters, Buddhist temples would carry out humanitarian aid including the provision of food, clothing, medical treatment, and medication. In order to assist those in need, Chinese Buddhist communities had established numerous specialised

charitable organisations and groups. Their charitable initiatives began to set a new trend of mutual assistance to promote unity and mutual assistance in the Chinese community (Xu, 1990). Since then, lay Buddhism has gradually gained traction in the Malay Peninsula. A notable example is the founding of the Buddhist Lodge in different towns. The first Buddhist Lodge, originally known as the Singapore Buddhist Sutra Circulation Center, appeared in Singapore in 1933. There are now about 100 Buddhist Lodge associations in Malaysia, but the exact number is uncertain as available data is lacking. The Malaysian Buddhist Kulapati Association, the leading organisation, has officially recognised 28 groups. Among these, four have a long history and significant membership. These are the Kuching Buddhist Society in Sarawak, Temple Chee Sze Lin in Malacca, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge (CBL) in Selangor, and Butterworth Lay Buddhist Society in Penang. Among the prominent Buddhist Lodges in the Klang Valley are the Damai Chempaka Meditation Society (Selangor) or the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge (CBL) which is the oldest and most established, boasting the largest and most active membership among these organisations. Others include the Buddhist Lodge Jonq Shan (Kuala Lumpur), Amal Siao Ji Shi (Kuala Lumpur), and the Jinjang Buddhist Association (Kuala Lumpur).

Buddhism and Gender Dynamics

In traditional Chinese society, women were held in a low social position and often oppressed. The immense pressure of survival led many women to turn to Buddhism for solace. During the modern Buddhist revival movement in China in the 1920s, female lay Buddhist groups emerged to become an essential part of the lay Buddhist community. These groups played an active role in advocating gender equality and women's liberation (Hu, 2011). The portrayal of women in Buddhist teachings further strengthened the connection between women and Buddhism, which indirectly encouraged greater female participation in Buddhist movements.

Gendered Imagery: Portrayal of Female *Bodhisattvas* in Buddhism

Buddhism advocates the concept of the *bodhisattva*. The idea is that everyone can use the wisdom of Bodhi to benefit themselves and others, ultimately liberating all sentient beings in the real world. Therefore, the majority of bodhisattvas are, in fact, lay believers. This concept was intended to complement and transform monastic Buddhism by incorporating lay Buddhism. Lay Buddhists maintain direct and close ties to the secular world and are better able to understand the struggles of all sentient beings. The bodhisattva, as a personality god, is modelled on the image of the lay Buddhist. When monks are referred to as bodhisattvas, it is generally a title of respect bestowed by laypeople, with the condition that these monks actively engage in real social activities. A monastic life detached from society and the people is inconsistent with the principles of Mahayana Buddhism.

Mahayana lay Buddhism has expanded the connection between Buddhism and society on many levels, putting into practice the bodhisattva's spirit of "self-interest and altruism" (Pan, 2000a: 21).

In fact, most believers' understanding of bodhisattvas is rooted in lay Buddhism. For instance, while Buddhist statues depict *bhikshus* as ordained monks, bodhisattvas are typically represented as laypeople. This is particularly evident in Chinese Buddhism, where bodhisattva statues are portrayed in lay attire, often adorned with a jewelled crown, celestial robes, skirts, and jewellery on their necks and arms. This imagery combines elements of ancient Indian nobility with those of ancient Chinese noblewomen.

Most bodhisattvas are depicted with plump, healthy faces and rosy complexions. Early bodhisattva statues featured tadpole-like moustaches, while those from the Tang and Song dynasties onward exhibit an increasing trend toward femininity. These later statues often showcase willowy eyebrows, cherry lips, jewelled crowns, shoulder-length black hair, plump figures, slender fingers, and an abstract idealisation of the secular woman. The portrayal of bodhisattvas in this manner underscores the special status of laypeople within Mahayana Buddhism (Pan, 2000a).

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Shurangama Sutra* both highlight Guanyin's ability to manifest in various forms according to the needs of living beings, with some texts specifically noting her ability to appear as a woman. This concept laid the groundwork for the later identification of Guanyin as a female bodhisattva in China. While Buddhist doctrine asserts that there is no inherent difference between the sexes of buddhas and bodhisattvas, Guanyin's compassion and capacity to alleviate suffering transcend gender, class, and moral superiority. However, these qualities may have seemed new and unfamiliar to the Chinese.

Guanyin not only brings spiritual enlightenment but also rescues individuals from worldly suffering by granting material pleasures, providing a good death, or offering salvation after death. Prior to Guanyin's emergence, no Chinese deity possessed such capabilities. Although there had been female deities in China before, none had received the same level of continuous worship as Guanyin. In China, Guanyin was eventually recognised as a female bodhisattva—not only in terms of her incarnation but also through uniquely Chinese representations, such as the White-robed Guanyin (associated with childbearing), the Guanyin of the Fish Basket, the Guanyin of the Water Moon, and the Guanyin of the South Sea. This emphasis on reconciling Confucianism and Buddhism is particularly evident in the figure of the Child-Sending Guanyin, who is responsible for granting children, making her especially appealing to Chinese women (X. R. Yang, 2004).

Li Yuhang's research (2020) on devotional arts produced by women analyses mediums such as painting, calligraphy, and embroidery, revealing how women's worship practices centred on Guanyin. This focus provides insights into women's religious agency during the late Ming and early Qing periods, enhancing our understanding of how artistic expression allowed women to sustain spiritual identities in harmony with Chinese religious traditions. Moreover, the positioning

of Guanyin as a female bodhisattva reflects Buddhism's practical empathy and attentiveness to women's experiences, acknowledging the unique challenges women face, particularly in bearing and raising children, which often exposes them more acutely to life's pains and misfortunes (X. R. Yang, 2004).

The Impact of Confucian Thought on Buddhist Perspectives of Female

Confucianism is central to Chinese culture as it shaped a highly ordered society characterised by a hierarchical structure that values family. This philosophy inherits the patriarchal social culture and gender system established during the Zhou Dynasty, which emphasises male superiority and female inferiority positioning men as leaders and women as followers.

As Confucianism advocates filial piety, the concept of "honouring one's mother" significantly influenced the Sinicisation of Buddhism. A notable symbol of this Sinicisation is the emphasis on maternal love during the Tang Dynasty, during which Buddhism actively promoted the concept of filial piety to reconcile its teachings with Confucian values that prioritise respect for mothers. This effort aimed to eliminate conflicts with Chinese cultural norms. For example, the *Sutra of the Great Kindness of Parent* extensively describes the hardships mothers endure during childbirth and child-rearing to compare their kindness to that of the Buddha. Additionally, texts such as the *Ullambana Sutra* and the *Buddha's Filial Piety Sutra* present a skewed view of parent-child relationships, downplaying the theory of equality and instead emphasising filial duty towards parents. This illustrates how Buddhism has emerged as a major force in promoting the respect of mothers. Moreover, Buddhist mothers significantly influenced their children's beliefs and served as intermediaries in the spread of Buddhism. By the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism had redefined traditional concepts such as women's virtues, maternal behaviour, chastity, and filial piety by integrating Buddhist and Confucian teachings.

The influence of Confucianism's concept of "honouring one's mother" is also evident in the portrayal of the female form of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Among the numerous bodhisattvas and deities in Buddhism, Guanyin stands out as a symbol of compassion and gentleness. She has gained widespread devotion among believers of various faiths and cultural backgrounds, particularly among women, to the extent that it is said, "every family worships Maitreya, and every household worships Guanyin."

Buddhism's view of women, which ideally respects and promotes equality between men and women, has often fallen short in practice, allowing for gender inequality to persist. This discrepancy can be traced back to Buddhism's inherent value orientation, which institutionally and spiritually tends to "honour men and denigrate women." In the secular realm, including the widely accepted "*Eight Respectful Conducts*" in Theravada Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism has had to adapt its teachings to align with secular laws to facilitate its spread.

Despite this, from the very beginning, the Buddha emphasised the equality of all living beings as a fundamental teaching of Buddhism. Additionally, the concept of gender equality has taken root in the hearts of many people. Confucianism, too, has undergone constant revisions in response to new social realities. Its biased patriarchal ethical norms, such as the inferiority of women and the "three obedience and four virtues" expected of women, have faced widespread criticism. Concurrently, Confucianism has sought to abandon its negative aspects while exploring more positive principles, such as the ideas of *yin* and *yang* interacting, producing and complementing each other and fostering respect for one's wife and respect for one's mother.

The Buddhist view of women continues to evolve and develop in response to social and historical changes. It is encouraging to observe that, since modern times, Buddhism has actively promoted the spirit of harmony and equality within Mahayana Buddhism. This evolution has included adapting to contemporary feminist thought to tone down the interpretation of certain derogatory statements about women in Buddhist scriptures, and emphasising the importance of education rights for Buddhist women, along with the relationship between the enjoyment of rights and the assumption of responsibilities.

In particular, many Buddhist women have cultivated a sense of agency, demonstrated a spirit of self-reliance and consciously embraced the mission entrusted to them by the times. They are dedicated to improving the status of women and advancing the development of Buddhism (Peng, 2008).

Social Progress on the Role of Females in Buddhism

Social evolution marked by significant socio-economic developments and gradual political openness since the beginning of the 20th century saw considerable changes in Buddhism relating to medicine, charity, Dharma propagation, Buddhist studies, and social education. Buddhist women are increasingly engaged in these fields and assuming leadership positions in Buddhist.

However, both bhikkhunis and laywomen still contend with traditional teachings in the "*Eight Respectful Conducts*" and the perceived inferiority of women in the secular world. Historically, women have faced unequal treatment within both the *sangha* and society at large.[2] Buddhist women are breaking free from longstanding constraints to exert greater influence in society today. This progress can be attributed primarily to the openness of social thinking and shifts in values, improvements in educational standards, and growing economic freedom. These changes are closely related to the broader social environment (X. R. Yang, 2004).

The rise of feminism in Europe and the United States from the 1970s sparked social movements fighting for gender equality. Entrenched "male thinking" that discriminated against women were critically examined Against this historical backdrop, X. R. Yang (2004) presents four key points.

First, Buddhism has always maintained that all living beings are equal, and this includes gender

equality. To address the many inequalities present in the world, it is necessary to recognise their origins through the lens of the inherent equality of all things. While the reality of inequality can be addressed through collective efforts, it begins with individuals practising self-reflection and growth. Humanity should strive to create a "pure land" on Earth, free from gender discrimination and species bias, where equality and happiness prevail. In this view, rights are universal; there are no specific "men's rights" or "women's rights," only the common human rights and the right to life for all beings.

Second, women must have the right to participate, which is intrinsically linked to the right to equality. Without the principle of gender equality, it is impossible to enjoy rights in other domains. Buddhism is grounded in real life rather than abstract teachings and stresses the importance of practice. The right way to understand another's life experiences is to recognise that all deserve the right to participate actively in society. This participation encompasses various fields, including politics, economics, culture, and religious activities according to the constitutional rights to which all citizens are entitled.

Third, women should possess autonomy. Buddhism teaches that everyone has limitless potential, and since men and women are equal, they should be the architects of their own destinies. However, women—particularly in traditional South and East Asian societies—have historically suffered from societal views of "women as inferior" and burdens associated with "heavy karma." To achieve true gender equality, women must cultivate a sense of independence, break free from reliance on men for security, and overcome the societal positioning that renders them weak. They should broaden their perspectives, actively engage in society, and work toward the welfare of all living beings.

Fourthly, women should have the right to dignity. From a Buddhist perspective, which posits that "all living beings have Buddha nature," women should be respected as "unique and esteemed" entities. The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* states: "If someone cannot recognise their Buddha nature, I would say that they are like a woman. If someone can recognise his Buddha nature, I would say he is a man. If a woman can recognise that she has Buddha nature, I would say that she is like a man" (X. R. Yang, 2003: 193–194).

A study of popular religion in Guangzhou during the Republican era illustrates how women were among the most active participants in temple festivals, even during the peak of the local government's anti-superstition campaign (Poon, 2011). Religion became a means of pursuing ideals of the "new woman," including gender equality, Chinese modernity, and national unity on their own terms. However, discourse around the "woman question" and the "religious question" was largely dominated by Han Chinese male elites, who prioritised these issues as part of nationalist agenda. For both male intellectuals and religious leaders, women's education and gender equality were seen as essential components of efforts to modernise Chinese religions (Kang, 2017). In Malaysia, the path toward gender equality has also seen significant development since the British colonial period and

the country's independence. With increasing democratic freedom and a more open society, there is an encouraging trend toward strengthening gender equality and advancing women's rights.

Based on fieldwork findings by Sharon Carstens (Carstens, 1980) and Lew (2021) at Swee Nyet Temple in Pulai, Kelantan women participation in religious activities was seen as a means of pursuing equality in their ongoing struggles for gender parity. Historically, certain positions in religious practices were reserved for men, with women primarily relegated to kitchen work until the 1970s. Similarly, at the CBL, the Women's Group has mainly been involved in preparing vegetarian meals during religious events. This reflects broader patterns of gender participation in religious activities but where women's roles have traditionally been more confined to supportive, domestic tasks.

Women participation in Buddhist life assumes different roles. Some are involved in Buddhist education such as teaching Buddhist scriptures and running schools, others contribute to social welfare and cultural initiatives, or actively engage in Buddhist social activities. As more women participate in the promotion of Buddhism, they help to develop a virtuous cycle of enhancing their religious and social roles. As women's status improves, so too does their impact on Buddhist education, Dharma propagation, charity, and other related causes (X. R. Yang, 2004).

Women in the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge: Participation and Community Impact

To illustrate the participation and the role of female lay Buddhists in Malaysia, a case study of a Buddhist Lodge is made. A Buddhist Lodge brings together lay Buddhists to harness collective strength, actively engage in Buddhism, promote its teachings, and enhance the contributions of Buddhists to society. Selected for study is the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge (CBL) which is a lay Buddhist association at Chempaka New Village in Petaling Jaya district of Selangor. Founded in 1985, among its founders was Liew Cheung Fat who rented a small wooden house in the New Village to serve as the association's first clubhouse.[3] The CBL has since been relocated to the nearby district of Kelana Jaya of Petaling Jaya, and finally to a nearby 0.2-hectare plot on which to build its new premises in 2000 (Editorial Board, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2011). The study aims to contribute to the limited knowledge about lay Buddhists in Malaysia by drawing on newspapers, interviews, and existing research on women from the perspectives of Buddhism. The choice of CBL for study is based on its long history, substantial membership, and dynamic vision of promoting Buddhism, along with its mission of serving society through the hosting of various activities, events and ceremonies.

The two major components in CBL are the Volunteer Group and the Women's Group. The former consists of female and male members who contribute on an individual and personal basis. The latter was established in 2018 to enable female lay members to play their role more effectively.

Female Volunteers

The volunteer team serves as the backbone for organising large events at the CBL. This team is divided into long-term and short-term volunteers. Long-term volunteers attend the Lodge every week or on the first and fifteenth of each month to share the workload. Their roles include kitchen staff responsible for preparing meals, a flower arrangement team that provides offerings and decorations, and a Dharma propagation team that recites sutras. Short-term volunteers include regular and temporary members recruited specifically for major events. Regular volunteers are mobilised when the team leader calls for assistance and to bring in new recruits to expand their numbers. Lay Buddhists who volunteer at the Lodge demonstrate a sincere commitment to serving Buddhism as an expression of the satisfaction and joy in being able to contribute. A virtue of Buddhism blessing is the ability to give rather than to receive.

Two exemplary members who have 30 years of dedicated voluntary work are Kwok Mei Fun and Wong Ming Sze. For 30 years they have devoted themselves to preparing vegetarian offerings and meals for worshippers as well as in arranging pots of flowers for ceremonial offerings as a means to pay respect to the Buddha on special occasions on the first and fifteenth of every month and on significant occasions such as Chinese New Year, Wesak Day, and the Great Dharma Gathering for the Transmission of Consciousness in the seventh lunar month (Editorial Board, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2011). They approach their tasks with tireless dedication to derive great joy in contributing to the Lodge and to reap positive karma.

The active lay members share a similar belief in the dignified role of volunteering and its value as a form of self-cultivation. They feel that through voluntary efforts and a kind heart, one can express one's compassion and love and thereby to foster a culture of caring and concern for humanity. The CBL calls for all to be uplifted by the Dharma and to enjoy the joy of volunteering on the Bodhisattva path:

> If everyone embraces the spirit of volunteering, society will naturally become harmonious. We hope that all individuals can emulate the example of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, extending compassion and equality to benefit all sentient beings. Through service and giving, we can grow individually and positively influence our family members, relatives, friends, and society at large (Editorial Board, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2011).

Family relationships are fundamental to interpersonal connections and play a significant role in the faith and religious behaviours of lay Buddhist women. Given that family members spend considerable time together and share deep emotional and blood ties, the impact of close relatives

in spreading the Dharma is particularly profound. This familial connection makes the message of Buddhism more likely to be embraced than that delivered by outsiders. The sharing of common values and interests within a family or clan fosters an environment conducive to religious dialogue. Consequently, a family that adheres to Buddhist beliefs is more likely to persuade other members within the household or clan to convert or engage in Buddhist activities (Su, 2021).

An exemplary volunteer who oversees the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre at the CBL, also serves as the registrar for the Buddhist Wedding Registration Office.[4] Through her gentle and attentive demeanour, she finds joy and meaning in her busy schedule in seamlessly balancing her responsibilities in her dual role as a director of the rehabilitation centre and a wedding registrar. Her dedicated participation in CBL activities has freed her from worries and to embrace a more focused, distraction-free life. Guided by the emphasis on compassion, she firmly believes in the teachings of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in seeking happiness for all and to wish all beings to be free from sufferings. Compassion represents the innate Buddha nature that is present in everyone and originates from the self and cannot be generated by external pressures (Editorial Board, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2010).

The team of volunteers at the CBL deserves immense recognition. Its team leader exemplifies one who, having encountered a low point in her career and facing a critical moment in her life, felt an immediate sense of calm and peace in the presence of the Buddha. This inspiring experience convinced her to dedicate offerings and eventually to join the volunteer organisation. The opportunity to contribute was a satisfying desire to repay the community. She has since been playing a crucial role in organising major events, such as the Wesak Day celebrations and fundraising dinners by skilfully mobilising volunteers from various quarters. She is capable of employing innovative ways to gathering hundreds of volunteers. Her experience as a manager in the business world enables her to organise events in a systematic and orderly manner and to co-ordinate work efficiently. The volunteers are formed into smaller teams each with group in charge of specific tasks. This systematic approach ensures that every volunteer is assigned a distinct role during significant events to facilitate seamless execution. She expresses deep gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to fulfil a desire to give back to the community (Personal communication, Tracy Lim, June 3, 2022).

Active involvement in CBL has allowed women of the new era to combine effective execution with a unique feminine sensibility. Women often prioritise their feelings and intuition when engaging with the world, relying on their hearts as much as their minds. This perspective allows them to be more attuned to practical problems in their lives, fostering a deeper connection to their faith. For many women, faith is an emotional experience that transcends complex concepts, providing comfort and solace. It is this sensibility that leads her to help establish the Buddhist study class at the Lodge. As mothers, women are passionate about teaching children in engaging ways that spark their interest in Buddhism. They advocate learning through play to satisfy children's innate curiosity and to make

the teaching and learning processes more accessible and enjoyable.

Today's women juggle family and career, but often at the expense of being physically and mentally drained. While physical comfort may be limited, the comfort found in faith is infinite and transcendent, and capable of offering strength, confidence, and hope (He, 2001). Not surprisingly, long-serving volunteers have devoted over 30 years of service to CBL. Initially drawn to Buddhism out of curiosity, many found meaning in life by drawing closer to Buddhism. Voluntary involvement in the activities of CBL has provided spiritual salvation to fill a void in their life (Personal communication, Chan Wai Chan, June 3, 2022).

According to Kuah (2015), women were traditionally regarded as those who did not "expose themselves" in public places, psychologically preventing them from performing certain actions such as entering coffeeshops alone. However, visiting a temple for worship and accepting refreshments was regarded as different. Women would often be seen in groups, engaging in social interactions, chatting, and exchanging news. This practice continues today, with temples often serving as gathering spaces for women, where it remains a social norm to accept drinks or light refreshments offered by the temple.

At CBL, many women volunteers are in their 60s or older, often involved in temple activities after their retirement. Research on the elderly shows that, in addition to family care, social support and social integration are crucial for healthy aging. Older adults rely on these support systems to foster a sense of personal belonging, to remain engaged with the outside world, and to make positive contributions to others (Kang, 2009).

Women's Group

The Women's Group set up in 2018 has grown to include members from the catering, flower arrangement, and handicraft workshop teams.

The Catering Team is responsible for food arrangements during CBL's celebrations. The Floral Art Team consists of creative members who sell potted flowers on the first and fifteenth of each month and handles floral decorations for various worship during ceremonial events. The Handicraft Workshop team promotes the spirit of environmental protection by recycling discarded materials into practical objects. The last group of volunteers gather on a weekly basis to re-design and transform discarded bags and other materials into delightful handbags, fruit baskets, and other decorative items. The exquisite, eco-friendly products are sold at charity events to raise awareness on environmental protection and conservation.

The Dharma Propagation Team of the Women's Group holds sutra transcription classes once a week to enable women to deepen their practice. The purpose is to cultivate mindfulness, enhance focus, and dedicate merit for the benefit of all beings (Editorial Board, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2020).

According to the leader of the Women's Group, the purpose of the Women's Group purpose is to pool the resources of women from diverse backgrounds to harness their energies and creativity effectively. Besides members from existing volunteer groups, Initially, existing women volunteers, such as those from the food preparation and flower arrangement teams, joined the group. The resourceful leader would leverage her personal connections to recruit new members and to establish the new teams. This was how the Environmental Protection Group was formed to produce the making of handicrafts for sale (Personal communication, Siaw Hwee Ling, June 3, 2022).

The Women's Group is actively engaged in 25 forms of activities under the aegis of CBL primarily involving the kitchen, floral arrangements, and environmental protection initiatives (Table 1). The Women's Group was established to connect more women with Buddhism and encourage them to volunteer their skills. Regular and meaningful activities are organised to foster unity among group members to help them to contribute to the Buddhist community and to enrich their own understanding of Buddhism. Due to the diverse nature of the group, the occasional often causes disagreements and conflicting opinions that interfere with internal harmony were almost unavoidable. Buddhism teaches tolerance and to banish egocentric feelings to overcome challenges successfully. Women volunteers, who are mainly 50 years or older, embrace the principles of harmony in their interpersonal relationships. They value harmony in their relationships to avoid the stresses that often accompany interpersonal, family, and social dynamics. "Harmony" and "compassion" are esteemed values that are guiding principles in living a normal life and are basic ingredients to sustain a stable, healthy and happy life (Yan, 2015).

Table 1

List of Activities of Women's Groups of Chempaka Buddhist Lodge, 2019 to 2022

Wesak Day	25 Jul 2019
Birthday of Guan Yin - Kitchen Team	2019
Birthday of Guan Yin - Floral Art Team	2019
One-day trip to Bentong Exchange and visit to the elderly home	
Environmental protection Workshop.	27 Jul 2019
"Dragon Boat Festival, learn to wrap dumplings" and "Dancing to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival."[5]	1 Aug 2019
Mid-Autumn Festival - Café opening.[6]	8 Jun 2019
Mid-Autumn Festival - Making environmentally friendly bags	9 Aug 2019
Mid-Autumn Festival - Floral Art Team	8 Aug 2019
Huayan Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony Floral Art Group	8 Aug 2019
Huayan Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony – Environmental Protection Group	19 Aug 2019

Huayan Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony – Food Preparation Group	19 Aug 2019
Mid-Autumn Festival.[7]	14 Sep 2019
80th Anniversary of Petaling SJKC Yuk Choy primary school.[8]	28-29 Sep 2019
Fahua Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony	31 Aug-1 Sep 2020
Qingming Festival Memorial Service	2 Apr 2021
Fahua Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony and the *Ullambana* Festival to remember and console the deceased.[9]	4-10 Apr 2021
3rd anniversary of the Women's Group	22 Dec 2021
Laba Festival – serving *Laba* porridge	10 Jan 2022
Feeding the gods and spirits – Environmental Protection Group.[10]	12 Feb 2022
Qingming Festival memorial service for the deceased	8-10 Apr 2022
Wesak Day charity sale	15 May 2022
Fahua Lianghuang Baochan Ceremony and the *Ullambana* Festival to remember and console the deceased	8-14 Aug 2022
Birthday of Guan Yin	14 Oct 2022
Fundraising bazaar at the Damansara Primary School in Bandar Sunway	17 Oct 2022

Source: Social media CBL and newspapers.

The backroom kitchen is a space exclusively for women, where food preparation becomes an important means of constructing a meaningful religious life. The communal vegetarian meals carry significant ritual meaning for the women. These meals serve as a major expression of their religious piety, and working in the kitchen is seen as a strenuous effort to gain religious merit, although not all women contribute with equal diligence (Kang, 2009).

The Women's Group at CBL primarily contributes through food preparation, using food literacy to practice and embody Buddhist values. In the domestic sphere, where food plays a central role, women express their Buddhist identities by practicing virtues and teaching others about Buddhism. Their involvement in food preparation—encompassing cooking, presentation, and appreciation—becomes a form of "gendered currency," a unique social value tied to their roles. This practice reinforces spiritual beliefs, conveys respect and care, and illustrates the cultural and religious identities expressed through gendered roles. It fosters social connections among practitioners and helps preserve and circulate Buddhist knowledge and values. Through food literacy, Buddhist women create and sustain their religious worlds, using their expertise to nurture Buddhist practice through both aesthetic and material forms of food. As a fundamental substance, food plays a critical role in religious life, requiring continuous engagement and production. Through these food practices, women establish affective boundaries of belonging, transforming food preparation and consumption into a relational process within the broader Buddhist community (Kolata & Gillson, 2021). Women

participate in Buddhist activities for three main reasons, each contributing to their spiritual growth and sense of community (Luo, 2010).

Firstly, spiritual support and sense of belonging. Many women seek spiritual support and a sense of belonging through their participation in Buddhist activities. Engaging in these activities enriches their lives and help them transform their lifestyles. Believers often feel a deep need to connect with others who share similar values and beliefs, and through volunteering, women can forge meaningful relationships. This interaction compensates for the loneliness that many older women experience, as the community provides much-needed spiritual comfort and support.

Secondly, mind regulation and spiritual improvement. Buddhism serves as a source of upliftment, helping individuals navigate the complexities of life with clarity and purpose. Through Buddhist teachings, women learn to accept difficult realities with a pragmatic and optimistic mindset. Concepts such as karma and reincarnation encourage them to approach life's challenges with resilience. Additionally, Buddhist principles of restraint and compromise aid in managing interpersonal relationships to foster a more harmonious existence.

Thirdly, sense of dependency and importance. Volunteering within the Buddhist community instils a sense of purpose and dependency among women. By dedicating themselves to serving others, volunteers find fulfilment in meeting the demands of both society and their organisation, which reinforces their sense of being useful and needed. In times of crisis, female volunteers often rely on the spiritual and mental support offered by Buddhism. During particularly challenging situations, they may turn to their faith for strength, expecting its supernatural power to guide them. When they successfully navigate adversity and turn challenges into opportunities, they feel an even deeper gratitude for the power of their faith, which in turn prompts them to adhere more consciously to Buddhist teachings (He, 2001).

Conclusion

By understanding Buddhism through a feminist lens, women have restructured their social status both within the domestic sphere and in local and global communities, emerging as socially visible and powerful figures. Their transformation from traditional Confucian roles to confident, modern, feminised selves has been central to this shift. Female figures such as Guanyin, women monastics as dharma masters and spiritual guardians, and lay women embodying compassion, all exemplify how women Buddhists pursue emotive compassionate roles in both local and global contexts. While not advocating for structural changes in socio-religious systems, these women have forged new paths within the religious sphere, reshaping their positions relative to their male counterparts and presenting themselves as a formidable force in the contemporary religious world (Kuah, 2009).

Since the transition from a matriarchal society in primitive times, male culture has dominated societal affairs in feudal China, resulting in the systematic deprivation of women's status and dignity. Traditional values, particularly those rooted in Confucianism, often relegated women to roles defined by the "three obediences and four virtues" that further restricts their social participation and family status (X. R. Yang, 2004). Since 1950s, women have increasingly turned to Buddhism, gradually identifying with its teachings. The growing number of female practitioners necessitates an exploration of the psychological characteristics that drive their belief in and engagement with religion. Women are generally more emotional and intuitive, traits that are shaped by their unique biological and psychological makeup. Research indicates that women's nervous systems tend to be more excitable, leading them to express emotions, whether joy or sorrow, more readily than males. This subjectivity in perception often allows women to become more readily responsive to the teachings of Buddhism and have a greater capacity to empathise deeply with others (He, 2001).

Women are also motivated by a strong maternal instinct, which propels them to be caring and to engage in charitable acts and community service. Their emotional responses enable them to connect profoundly with the teachings presented during Dharma talks from which they derive inspirations to learn and grow. Some lay members through their exemplary dedication articulate contemporary challenges through Buddhist principles and inspire others to become volunteers in order to serve those in need and spread the spirit of selflessness by devoting themselves to the Dharma.

Ultimately, participation in Buddhist activities fulfils the essential psychological needs of many women. As societal norms evolve, women's roles are undergoing a transformation to adapt to diverse needs and aspirations. While hard work may satisfy material requirements, self-worth and personal fulfilment is increasingly sought through continued learning and the exploration of one's potential. Buddhism's emphasis on equality provides women with spiritual nourishment and a sense of balance, and at the same time to enable them to showcase their skills to contribute meaningfully to the community.

For many women, especially those in their 50s and 60s, participation in Buddhist activities serves as a relief from the pressures of daily life. With diminished domestic chores and professional commitments, these women seek a tranquil and serene lifestyle to rediscover a return to their inner selves. Engaging in Buddhist practices, such as vegetarianism and listening to the Dharma, offers them a chance to find peace and fulfilment in their lives (Su, 2021).

Historically, women have played a fundamental role in the development of Buddhism in their diverse capacities as supporters, promoters, and practitioners. Their active engagement in charitable activities reflects compassion and a commitment to societal contribution. The laywomen of the CBL serve as a vital bridge for the transmission of lay Buddhism in Malaysia and significantly contribute to the evolution of Buddhism in the contemporary era.

* Dr. Siew-Boon Lew [廖筱纹] is Assistant Professor, Institute of International Education, New Era University College, Kajang, Malaysia. Email: siewboon.lew@newera.edu.my

Notes

1 The concept of the "pure land" originated in India as part of Buddhist philosophy, which teaches that the mind is both the source of suffering and the key to liberation. In Mahayana Buddhism, the purity of one's mind determines the purity of the Buddha land, an idealized realm free from corruption and imperfection. In modern China, this idea evolved to address societal realities. It encourages individuals to confront worldly chaos with a pure and equal heart, actively practice Buddhism, support one another, and work together to create a "pure land" on earth, blending spiritual ideals with practical action.

2 Sangha is a Pali term found in various Indian languages, meaning "association," "assembly," "company" or "community." In the context of Buddhism, it refers to the monastic order, which includes monks, nuns and novices.

3 The New Villages were established by the colonial authority during the "Emergency" from 1948 to 1960 to counter anti-British insurgency. About 450 such villages were hastily set up to re-settle close to half a million rural Chinese into compact settlements. They were mainly deliberately situated at the outskirts of the bigger towns for ease of defence. The primary intention was to cut off access of the insurgents to food and material support of the rural inhabitants. The spin-off effects of this resettlement were to accelerate the urbanisation of the rural population and to facilitate the provision of education, water and electric supplies as well as health and other social services (see Sandhu, 1964; Voon, 2009).

4 The Chempaka Buddhist Lodge established the "Stroke Rehabilitation Centre" to provide assistance towards rehabilitation of stroke patients regardless of race or religious beliefs. It organised a charity dinner on June 6, 2010, to raise awareness of the public on the need to care for stroke victims. However, the centre has now ceased operations due to insufficient funding.

5 The Dragon Boat Festival, held by the Women's Group, attracted 60 participants. It is the intention of the Women's Group to facilitate the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture through this event. The team leader was responsible for procuring the necessary ingredients for the preparation of dumpling and for instructing attendees in the requisite techniques.

6 The coffee shop was operational for a period of ten days, which coincided with the Mid-Autumn Festival. The Women's Group assumed responsibility for the management of the coffee shop with the objective of providing a space for the believers who had gathered for the festival to relax and engage in conversation. The coffee shop was managed by the Women's Group, who prepared the requisite ingredients in advance of opening the shop at 8am. This afforded the believers the opportunity to partake of brunch and refreshments during their leisure time.

7 On September 14, 2019, the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge organised a Mid-Autumn Festival Fair. In addition to the parent-child mooncake-making activity in the afternoon, there were also a variety of stage performances, an ink calligraphy exhibition, a lantern riddle guessing game, and a lantern-lit garden tour. That evening the Women's Group also presented handmade mooncakes to all the guests in attendance.

8 On September 18, 2019, Chempaka Buddhist Lodge participated in the charity bazaar organised by SJKC Yuk Choy. In addition to selling their specialties such as Laba porridge and Acar, the women's group also made a variety of environmentally friendly handicrafts for sale on the day, with all proceeds going to support Chinese language education.

9 Starting from mid-August, the volunteer group under the Women's Group has been in full swing preparing for this grand event.

10 The Affairs Group and Environmental Protection Group under the Women's Group prepared 50 gift hampers for the participating worshippers on the 12th day of the first lunar month.

References

Carstens, S. A. (1980). *Images of Community in a Chinese Malaysian Settlement*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Dai, S. [戴圣] (206 B.C.-24 A.D.). 礼记・玉藻篇 [*Liji: Yu Zao edition*]. Electronic Chinese Philosophy Books Project. https://ctext.org/zhs, viewed on January 30, 2024.

Editorial Board, Friends of the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge [千百家佛教居士林之友会讯编委会] (2010). 千百家佛教居士林之友会讯 [*Newsletter of Chempaka Buddhist Lodge*], No. 3.

Editorial Board, Friends of the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge [千百家佛教居士林之友会讯编委会] (2011). 千百家佛教居士林之友会讯 [*Newsletter of Chempaka Buddhist Lodge*], No. 7.

Editorial Board, Friends of the Chempaka Buddhist Lodge [千百家佛教居士林之友会讯编委会]

(2020). 千百家佛教居士林之友会讯 [*Newsletter of Chempaka Buddhist Lodge*], No. 19.

He, Z.-R. [贺璋瑢] (2001). 关于女性宗教信仰建立的几点思考 [Some thoughts on the establishment of women's religious beliefs]. *Journal of South China Normal University*, 3, 45–50.

Hu, X. [胡新] (2011). 近代居士佛教研究 [A study of modern lay Buddhism] [Unpublished master's thesis]. Central China Normal University, Wuhan. CNKI Open.

Huang, Julia C. (2008). Gendered charisma in the Buddhist Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) movement. *Nova Religion: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 12(2), 29–47.

Jessup, J. B. (2010). *The Householder Elite: Buddhist Activism in Shanghai, 1920–1956*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of California, Berkeley.

Kang, X.-F. (2009). Rural women, old age, and temple work: A case from Northwestern *Sichuan. China Perspectives*, 4, 42–53.

Kang, X.-F. (2017). Women, gender and religion in modern China, 1900s–1950s. *Nan Nü* [男女], 19, 1–27.

Kolata, P. & Gillson, G. (2021). Feasting with Buddhist women: Food literacy in religious belonging, *Numen*, 68, 567–592.

Kuah, Pearce K.-E. (2009). *State, society and religious engineering: towards a reformist Buddhism in Singapore*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Kuah, Pearce K.-E. (2015). Engendering religious compassion: Chinese women and the micro-politics of Buddhist volunteerism. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 43(4), 357–375.

Lew, S. B. (2021). 金山作客—吉兰丹水月宫及其观音信仰 [*Discovering the Goddess of Mercy in Swee Nyet Temple of Pulai, Kelantan*]. New Era University College, PPWB, Selangor.

Li, Y.-H. (2019). *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic devotion of Buddhist women in later Imperial China.* Columbia University Press.

Luo, D. [罗迪] (2010). 昆明佛教居士林的社会功能分析 [*Analysis of the social functions of Kunming Buddhist laymen's association*] [Unpublished master's thesis]. Yunnan University, Kunming. CNKI Open.

Pan, G.-M. [潘桂明] (2000a). 中国居士佛教史 [*A history of Chinese lay Buddhism*]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

Pan, G.-M. [潘桂明] (2000b). 居士佛教源流谈 [On the origin and development of lay Buddhism]. *Buddhist Culture*, 2, 71–86.

Peng, H. [彭华] (2008). 佛教与儒家在女性观上的相互影响与融合 [The interaction and integration of Buddhist and Confucian views on women]. *Philosophical Trends* 9, 70–73.

Poon, S.-W. (2011). *Negotiating religion in modern China: State and common people in Guangzhou, 1900-1937*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Sandhu, K. S. (1964). Emergency resettlement in Malaya. *Journal of Tropical Geography*, 18, 157–183.

Su, R.-N. [苏日娜] (2021). 女性佛教居士行为与认同的社会学研究 [*A sociological study of the behaviour and identity of female Buddhist laypeople*]. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot. CNKI Open.

Xu, G.-D. [许国栋] (1990). 新马华人与佛教 [*Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia and Buddhism*]. *Overseas Chinese History Studies*, 4, 40–46.

Voon, P.-K. (2009). The Chinese New Villages in Malaysia: Impact of demographic changes and response strategies. In Masami Fujimaki (Ed.), *Studies on Malaysia's poverty problems in the regional and multi-ethnic context* (pp. 53–84). Ritsumeikan University.

Yan, X. [闫雪] (2015). 社会学视角下佛教禅宗居士生活状况研究 [*A sociological study of the living conditions of Buddhist Chan laypeople*]. [Unpublished master's thesis]. Northwest University, Xi'an. CNKI Open.

Yang, Mayfair M.-H. (2020). *Re-enchanting-Ritual economy and society in Wenzhou, China*. Duke University Press.

Yang, X.-R. [杨孝容] (2003). 略论佛教女性观及其与社会历史的共相嬗变 [A brief discussion of the Buddhist view of women and its co-evolution with social history]. *Qiu Suo* [求索], 6, 193–195.

Yang, X.-R. [杨孝容] (2004). 佛教女性观源流辨析 [*An analysis of the origin and development of the Buddhist view of women*]. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Sichuan University, Sichuan. CNKI Open.

Yu, Y.-S. [余英时] (1987). 士与中国文化 [*The scholar and Chinese culture*]. Shanghai People's Publishing House.