

Becoming Men of Hpoun: Masculinity, Ethical Personhood, and Moral Knowledge in Burmese Buddhist Life

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Abstract

This study examines masculinity in Myanmar through the concept of Ethical Masculine Personhood, a theoretical framework developed to understand masculinity as a process of moral formation rather than merely a social role, political structure, or gender performance. Existing studies of Myanmar masculinity have often emphasized patriarchy, militarization, nationalism, and social hierarchy. While these approaches remain important, they do not fully explain how masculine legitimacy becomes recognized and evaluated within Burmese Buddhist moral worlds.

Drawing on ethnographic engagement with the Burmese diaspora community and anthropological approaches to personhood, ethics, and gender, this study argues that masculinity in Myanmar is produced through culturally specific systems of moral knowledge. In Burmese Buddhist contexts, personhood is understood as relational, karmically conditioned, and socially visible through ethical conduct. Masculine authority therefore depends not only on power or social position but also on moral recognition.

The framework of Ethical Masculine Personhood examines how concepts such as hpoun (karmic merit), hiri (moral conscience), ottappa (moral dread), awza (social influence), and ana (formal authority) shape understandings of masculine legitimacy. These concepts reveal that authority is not simply possessed but continuously evaluated through relationships, discipline, responsibility, and ethical behavior.

By situating masculinity within Buddhist moral epistemologies, this study challenges universalizing assumptions within Euro-American theories of gender that often privilege individuality, identity, sexuality, or domination as primary analytical categories. Instead, it proposes that local moral traditions can provide theoretical resources for understanding gendered personhood on their own terms.

The study further explores how political transformations in Myanmar, particularly the crisis following the 2021 coup, have destabilized older forms of masculine authority and produced competing visions of ethical masculinity. Ultimately, this research argues that Burmese masculinity is best understood as an ongoing process of moral becoming shaped by karma, social recognition, political change, and competing interpretations of ethical life.