

Chapter 1

The Infinite Worlds of Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns¹

Oral and written sources often describe Taiwan as the *tiankong* (literally, heaven, or sky) for Buddhist nuns.² I translate this term as “infinite worlds” for two reasons. First, to indicate that Taiwan is a free and open space for Buddhist nuns’ development, in stark contrast with China where the nuns are “utterly dependent on [the] patrilineal political hierarchy”³ of the Communist party-state and its Buddhist Association.

Taiwan’s developed economy and open civil society have directly facilitated the rapid development of Buddhism and the nuns’ order in recent decades. Furthermore, since the end of martial law in 1987, there has been no central Buddhist or government authority in Taiwan, as in China or in other Buddhist countries, controlling ordinations and directing or coordinating the activities of Buddhist monasteries, temples, lay associations, and so forth. Li Yuzhen argues that even at the height of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC)’s influence in Taiwan from 1949 to 1987, though it alone administered the ordination system during that time and supposedly had direct access to the Nationalist party-state power structure and its resources, BAROC never completely functioned as a central ecclesiastic authority. Thus, she writes: “In order to understand the consequent vitality of Taiwanese nuns after the 1970s, it is important for us to remember this decentralized structure in Taiwanese Buddhism,”⁴ in which temples and monasteries are independent, self-administered, and must find their own means of financial support.

Second, “infinite worlds” connotes the great variety among Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, to be illustrated later in this chapter. Significant differences exist within each monastic community (according to monastic generation, family and educational background, talents, and temperament), not to mention the differences among monasteries, due to the free and decentralized environment mentioned above. Also, in Taiwan there are monasteries composed only of nuns, or only of monks, as well as mixed-sangha communities.⁵ The Taiwanese model of the mixed-sex sangha, where monks and nuns worship

and work on the same premises, is not found in the orthodox Chinese Buddhist tradition, nor is a mixed-sex sangha found anywhere else in Asia. This unusual arrangement evolved out of special historical circumstances that will be related below.

Reconstructing Taiwan's Buddhist History: Problems and Prospects

Scholars in Taiwan have belatedly begun research on Qing-era Buddhist institutional history in Taiwan, having previously focused on twentieth-century developments, especially the post-1949 period and the recent decades of Buddhist revival in Taiwan. However, Buddhist institutions and practices have been an integral part of Taiwan history since the early Chinese settlement of the island. There is a record of Chinese immigration to Taiwan at least from the fourteenth century, and subsequent peaks in immigration occurred around the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and also around 1661 with the arrival of anti-Qing military leader Zheng Cheng'gong. The Zheng family ruled Taiwan for twenty-two years from 1661, the year Zheng Cheng'gong expelled the Dutch colonists from Taiwan, until 1683, when Qing authorities occupied Taiwan and designated it as a prefecture of Fujian province. The Chinese immigrants brought with them their deities such as the Bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin; the "goddess of the sea," Mazu; and the "Royal Lords," *wangye*, deities capable of preventing plagues and calamities. Qing sources note that during the "Zheng period," government and local gentry established three Buddhist temples in the Tainan area, and Qing records mention the presence of a few Buddhist monks sent from China.⁶ The "Zheng period" was also known for its "six eminent Buddhist teachers," including one laywoman, a member of the ousted Ming royal family.⁷

In Fu-Ch'üan Hs'ing's estimation of the Qing historical records, the Qing era ". . . was a period of prosperity for Taiwanese Buddhism" due to political and economic support from the government authorities, literati, merchants, and the populace.⁸ The Taiwan County Gazetteer of 1720 notes the existence of six Buddhist temples in Tainan and Tainan County, including one Guangci An, possibly a nunnery.⁹ Thereafter, Buddhist temples were also built in Taipei, Jilong (Keelung), and Xinzhu (Hsinchu), such as Dizang An (1757). Government officials and literati founded some temples, and merchants founded others; donations by non-elite lay believers were crucial, as always.¹⁰

Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist circles maintained constant interaction from the Zheng period on (1661–1683).¹¹ Temples such as Kaiyuan Temple (1689) in Tainan and Longshan Temple in Taipei (1740), for example, were "branch" temples named for their "root" temples in China. Kaiyuan Temple, supported and funded by officials and literati, was the largest Buddhist temple

in Taiwan during the Qing dynasty and was one of Tainan's "five great monasteries of the Qing," including Zhuxi Temple, Mituo Temple, Fahua Temple, and Longhu Yan.¹² Chinese temples sent monks to Taiwan to serve as abbots, and potential ordinands in Taiwan traveled to Fujian (especially, Gushan's Yongquan Temple) or to Xiamen to become formally ordained and returned to Taiwan to the temple where they had been tonsured, or were assigned to other temples in Taiwan.¹³

An in-depth history of Qing-era Buddhist personnel and institutions in Taiwan is beyond the scope of this book. At the least, however, we should note the discrepancy between the overall positive impression of Qing-era Buddhism in Taiwan offered by Hs'ing (1983) and Shi Huiyan (1996, 1999) with other statements about the "weak condition" of Buddhism in the "wild frontier" of Taiwan: "Chinese and Japanese scholars are unanimous in their negative assessment of the state of Buddhism in Taiwan in the period between . . . Zheng Cheng'gong and the cessation of Taiwan to Japan in 1895."¹⁴ Based on sources published in the 1970s, Jones writes that "monks in Taiwan . . . were few in number and for the most part not of high quality; . . . (t)he monastic establishment contained a few virtuous monks and not a few charlatans. . ."¹⁵

This derogatory attitude toward Taiwan's pre-twentieth-century Buddhist personnel and institutions is a recurrent strain found in Japanese colonial-era sources (which dismiss Taiwan's monastics and laypeople as "ignorant" and "superstitious"), Nationalist government documents, and some contemporary works. A book of 1995 edited by a monk in Taiwan bluntly claimed that from the seventeenth century to 1895, "formally-ordained monastics were few; Buddhism in Taiwan was a mostly strange and bizarre kind."¹⁶

However, the more nuanced works of Hs'ing (1983), Kan (1999), and Shi Huiyan (1996, 1999), based on a wide range of sources from various periods in the Qing, portray the continuous growth and development of Buddhist institutions in Taiwan as spreading out from Tainan and important urban areas. Additionally, Vincent Goossaert argues that it is not tenable to argue that Taiwan's Buddhism was "weak" because it lacked a monastic ordination center.¹⁷ In China, large wealthy monasteries, especially those that traditionally held ordination ceremonies, were found only in a few provinces. Furthermore, as of 1900, "'Buddhism' [in terms of practice] was totally integrated with 'Chinese popular religion'" so that to call the extant syncretic practices heterodox, bizarre, or superstitious is to employ the critical rhetoric of Buddhist modernizers.¹⁸ Thus, we should note that the above-mentioned critical assessments reflect the biases of Japanese colonial and Nationalist "modernizing" authorities intent on transforming and co-opting Buddhist institutions and practices in Taiwan, in tandem with the agenda of Chinese Buddhist reformers, who sought to separate "Buddhism," centered on the learning and propagation of selected Buddhist *sūtras*, from "superstitious devotional practices."¹⁹ At any rate, to reach substantive conclusions about the state of

Taiwan's monastics and Buddhist institutions of the Qing period will require more evidence and more research regarding the numbers and background of monastics, the relations between temples and ruling elites, and varying local cultic and liturgical needs and practices.

Buddhist Women in Taiwan During the Qing Period

Thanks to the efforts undertaken by a few scholars in Taiwan in recent years, we can sketch out a broad outline of Buddhist women's diverse practices in Qing-era Taiwan (17th c.–1895). During this period, women in Taiwan were excluded from the Confucian public sphere, nor could they train or serve as Daoist priests, though they could become spirit mediums, some involved with spirit-writing connected with “phoenix halls.”²⁰ Numerous women participated in the popular religious sects called the *zhaijiao*, “vegetarian religions,” whose followers kept a partial or total vegetarian diet, and were devoted to worship of Guanyin, or to the Eternal Mother, *wusheng laomu*.²¹ Taiwan's *zhaijiao* sects had both male and female members, but the Japanese colonial government noted “the presence of a large number of female *zhaijiao* members,”²² as was also the case in rural Guangdong at the turn of the century.²³ One could practice *zhaijiao* without “leaving home,” however, entering a *zhaijiao* order might offer young women a temporary or permanent alternative to an arranged marriage, or widows a refuge from oppressive families.

In Taiwan, evidence for *zhaijiao* practice dates back to at least the seventeenth century, and the sects' relationship to institutional Buddhism is complex. Scholars like Topley and Jiang focus on the sectarian nature of the *zhaijiao* distinct from Buddhism, with their own “. . . independent texts, patriarchal lineage, initiation rituals, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and institutions.”²⁴ In Li Yuzhen's analysis, *zhaijiao* and the varieties of female practitioners in Taiwan are more usefully studied together with institutional Buddhism and she suggests the following typology (excluding here the priests and nuns belonging to Japanese sects in Taiwan):²⁵

The female non-celibate followers of *zhaijiao* who lived at home but worshipped at Vegetarian Halls.

The female celibate members of *zhaijiao* living in family *zhaitang* or at community *caitang*. Many *zhaitang* were built by pious families; several famous and wealthy lineages in Taiwan including the Banqiao Lim family; the Xinzhu Zheng family; and the Wufeng Lim family and other families built *zhaitang* for their unmarried daughters to live and practice in, and sometimes administer. Some

all-female *zhaitang* were headed by a female²⁶ but many *zhaitang* were led by a male priest, *caigong*, with his wife referred to as *caipo*. Depending on the type of *zhaitang*, property and leadership positions were often inheritable, whether within families or transmitted from master to disciple.

Non-ordained vegetarian women, *caigu* or *zhaigu*, residing at private Buddhist Halls, *fotang*, or at Mountain Buddhist Nunneries associated with the temples on the Guanyin pilgrimage routes in Taiwan. Along with Mount Putuo off the Zhejiang coast, Taiwan has for centuries been a major pilgrimage center for Guanyin devotees (Figure 1.1). One famous site for Guanyin worship is Longshan Temple founded in Taipei, 1740, but in addition to the many urban temples dedicated to Guanyin, pilgrims traveled outside cities to Guanyin temples called *yansi*, located at the border between local settled communities and the mountain “wilderness.”²⁷

Finally, we come to the category of Buddhist nuns affiliated with Chinese Buddhist institutions such as *fosi*, *chansi*, and *chanyuan*.

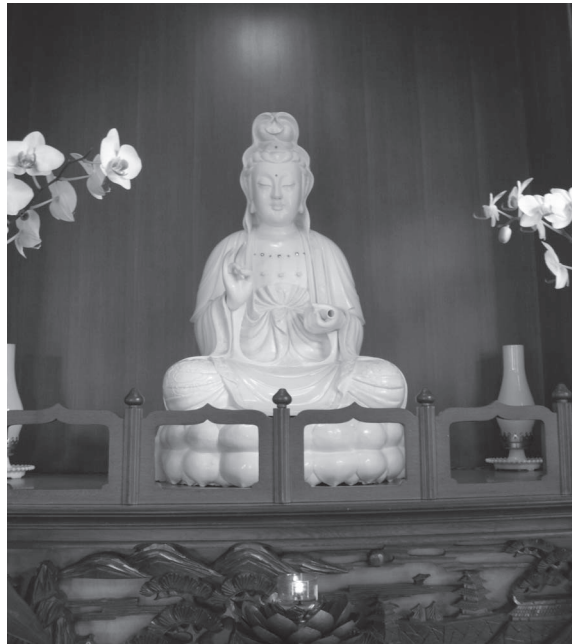


Figure 1.1. Statue of Guanyin (Elise A. DeVido)

The Enigma of Nuns in Qing Taiwan

The few scholars who have studied this issue have great faith in the supposed efficacy of Qing religious laws, as well as the accuracy of Japanese colonial officials' findings. First, there is the mantra that "Qing law of 1764 forbade women under forty years old to enter Buddhist nunneries."²⁸ But these scholars, like Jiang Canteng for example, do not elaborate upon where and how such a law was effective, given the huge geographical expanse of the Qing empire.

However, in undertaking his path-breaking project to map Chinese "religious" and "clerical" geography in late Imperial times, Vincent Goossaert has found much material on Qing-era female registered and unregistered clergy (Buddhist and Daoist), and doubts that either Qing laws or Confucian anti-clerical literature met with great success in preventing women from joining religious orders. He has found that in some regions of China there were large numbers of nunneries; furthermore, many female clerics were employed as managers in local temples.²⁹ Therefore, it may be premature to infer, as Jiang Canteng and Charles B. Jones do, that Qing laws successfully barred women from becoming nuns in Taiwan.³⁰

Second, scholars place much weight on a report on religion in Taiwan published in March 1919 by the Japanese colonial government that claimed there were no ordained nuns in Taiwan, "only *zhaigu*."³¹ However, this is an official report on the state of religion in Taiwan from the Japanese perspective, and furthermore it is not a comprehensive history of Buddhist practices and female religious in Taiwan. What appeared to be true to the Japanese colonial government as of March 1919 should not be presumed as the situation obtaining fifty, one hundred, or two hundred years previously in Taiwan.

The enigma of nuns in Qing-era Taiwan deserves a separate and full study, and regrettably can only be hinted at here, in two examples. One is taken from a local gazetteer first published in 1720 by Tainan official Chen Wenda:

Monks and nuns (*sengni*) are of the populace (*min*) but they are heterodox. Yet they have not been abolished in all the past dynasties because they take care of widows, widowers, orphans, people without means of support, and comfort them in their sorrow when facing sickness and death. In Taiwan, many monks are handsome young men; they chew betel nut and watch dramas in open-air theaters. The old nuns (*laoni*) raise teenage boys and girls to be their disciples. This greatly offends the harmony of heaven and earth and is deleterious to the people's customs.³²

The local official in Tainan who wrote this passage in the early eighteenth century is ambivalent about *sengni*: though praising them for their compas-

sion and social welfare contributions throughout history, he still characterizes them as “heterodox.” He casually mentions the precept-breaking behavior of the “handsome young monks,” but directly criticizes “old nuns” for violating Confucian norms regarding segregation of the sexes.

Another brief allusion to nuns dates from 1811. In that year, local officials in Tainan seized a temple dedicated to the Daoist immortal Lu Dongbin and renamed it the Yinxin Academy (*Yinxin shuyuan*). The officials' excuse for seizing this property was that the nuns (*biqiuni*) residing there had “violated temple regulations (*qinggui*).” No further explanation is given, except that one of the accounts, the “Education Record” section, calls this temple a “White Lotus Vegetarian Hall,” suggesting sectarian and thus prohibited religious activity. It cannot be ascertained from these two accounts exactly what type of Buddhist practices the nuns were engaging in, “White Lotus” or otherwise, and the sectarian accusation seems a pretext for official confiscation of temple property.³³ But it is worth noting that the term used here is not *zhaigu*, but *biqiuni*, though their ordination status cannot be confirmed.

During the Qing period, monks from Taiwan regularly travelled to Fujian to be ordained; perhaps they brought their sisters or mothers to be ordained as well.³⁴ Another possibility is that “. . . Chinese monasteries running ordination altars allowed women to mail in an ordination fee and gain an ordination certificate without attending the ordination in person,” called *jijie*, mail-in ordination,³⁵ but it is yet unclear how many Taiwanese women religious did this.³⁶

Records once held by Qing-era Buddhist temples in Taiwan are lost or incomplete, partly because the Japanese colonial authorities “. . . destroyed many temple and meeting-hall records and historical documents . . .” during their rule.³⁷ Further research in this area would necessitate the combing of the historical records, if they still exist, from ordination centers in Fujian, Xiamen, etc., to find possible mention of nuns from Taiwan. But even without a determination of how many nuns in Taiwan before 1919³⁸ received formal ordination, it would still be valuable to know more about the lives and practices of the *ni* and *biqiuni* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries so fleetingly mentioned in the sources above.

Buddhist Women during the Japanese Colonial Period, 1895–1945

The Japanese colonial authorities propagated State Shintō and facilitated the development of “eight schools and twelve sects of Japanese Buddhism” in Taiwan, with Sōtō and Rinzai Zen and the True Pure Land sects predominating.³⁹ Japanese Buddhist sects, especially Sōtō Zen, eventually seized control over most of the *zhaijiao* sects.⁴⁰ However, monks such as Jueli, Shanhui, Benyuan, and

Yongding endeavored to sustain and develop Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan, even as they cooperated with Japanese colonial and Buddhist authorities.⁴¹ Continuing Taiwan's long tradition of Buddhist exchanges with China, Shanhui for example invited Buddhist monks from China to teach in Taiwan, such as the head of the Buddhist Association of the ROC, Yuanying, and famed Buddhist reformer Taixu; and monks from Taiwan studied at Taixu's Min'nan Buddhist Institute. Taiwan's monks also organized the first ordinations held on the island: Kaiyuan Temple held the first ordination ceremony in Taiwan for monks in 1917 (at which Taixu officiated) and for nuns in 1919; ordinations continued at different temples until 1942.⁴² Not surprisingly, given Taiwan's large number of female Buddhist practitioners, in the ordinations of 1924, 1934, and 1940, female ordinands outnumbered male by a large margin.⁴³

Jueli in particular is noted for his efforts to educate and train Buddhist women by holding public classes and founding the Fayun Women's Research Institute and four nunneries.⁴⁴ The three largest nunneries in the Japanese period were Longhu An in Dagang, founded by the monk Yongding in 1908; Pilu Chan Temple in Houli, founded by Jueli in 1928; and Yuantong Chan Temple, founded by Jueli's disciple, the nun Miaoqing, in 1927 in Taipei County. A number of nuns from these temples become important personnel in post-war Buddhist circles in Taiwan.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the monk Jueli accompanied his nun disciple Miaoqing (1901–1956) to Yongquan Temple in Fujian to receive full ordination (year unknown), and Miaoqing thereafter lectured on the *dharma* to women at Fayun Temple and Longshan Temple, both headed by Jueli.⁴⁶ Another of Jueli's nun disciples Miaoxiu (1875–1952) was also ordained at Yongquan Temple, year unknown,⁴⁷ and Shanhui's disciple Deqin (1888–1961) went there to study Buddhism in 1935.⁴⁸ However Jueli, for one, had to endure criticism by conservatives for his support of nuns and Buddhist women.⁴⁹

As for Taiwanese women's options within Japanese Buddhism, some women were ordained as Rinzai nuns. The Japanese authorities in Taiwan provided some opportunities for women's Buddhist education and occupational training,⁵⁰ but the Japanese set quotas favorable to Taiwanese men seeking Buddhist education; and only men could be ordained as priests, with full ritual, administrative, and financial powers.⁵¹ A number of Taiwanese women from wealthy families studied in Japan and some became important bridges between the pre- and post-1949 Buddhist traditions in Taiwan.⁵²

The Flourishing of the Nuns' Order after 1949

After the defeat of the Nationalist government in China in 1949, Buddhist monks, mainly from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, sought refuge in Taiwan.⁵³ Though

among these were some monks well-known in China, they were not necessarily welcomed and assisted in Taiwan. Most did not speak Taiwanese and many were turned away from Taiwanese temples onto the streets to fend for themselves. Due to the chaotic and dangerous conditions of the transition from Japanese to Chinese rule and the subsequent anti-Communist campaigns, these monks often proselytized in secret, necessarily moving from temple to temple. Unless they enjoyed direct Nationalist government political protection, they risked harassment and arrest.

Monks from China such as Baisheng (1904–1989), Cihang (1893–1954), Yinshun (1906–2005), and Xingyun (b. 1927) fundamentally depended upon Taiwan's native Buddhist women for day-to-day survival. Nuns active from 1945 to the 1980s were great pioneers, such as Yuanrong, Tianyi, Ciguan, Cihui, Daxin, Xiuguan, Xiuhui, Ruxue, Miaoqing, and others. These nuns were the bridge between the Japanese period of Buddhism and the re-establishment of Chinese institutional Buddhism, working with monks from China, building temples and Buddhist institutes, translating monks' *dharma* talks into Taiwanese, teaching the *dharma*, transmitting the formal precepts, and cultivating new generations of nuns. However, they deferred to the monk-centered system and did not, or could not, gain public credit for their hard work.⁵⁴

Thus, the drastic sociopolitical changes after 1949 had different repercussions for male and female Buddhists. The incoming Buddhist authorities were determined to “cleanse” Taiwanese Buddhism of its “heterodox” characteristics such as married male priests, non-tonsured nuns, and non-vegetarian practices, and to establish in Taiwan what they recognized as Orthodox Chinese Buddhism. In the process, BAROC and their allies clashed with the Japanese married priests and Taiwanese monks, with their own lineages and local networks, with struggles, some to the death, over leadership and property.⁵⁵ But to many *zhaigu* and nuns ordained during the Japanese era, accepting the authority of BAROC and becoming tonsured and fully-ordained by this organization represented a promotion in status, and could lead to positions in temple administration and ordination platforms,⁵⁶ though the “price” was to acquiesce to the authority of male monks from China.⁵⁷

There are a number of reasons why the nuns' order flourished in Taiwan after 1949. Monk leaders in Taiwan faced what they believed was a “crisis,” even signalling “*mofa*,” the end of the *dharma*:⁵⁸ Women outnumbered men in Taiwanese Buddhism, as evidenced by numbers of *zhaigu* and in numbers of candidates at ordination altars. Monks arriving from China were surprised by the large numbers of *zhaigu* entering Buddhist institutes for study; the large numbers of *zhaigu* becoming nuns; and the long-standing Taiwanese custom of male and female Buddhist practitioners living and/or worshipping together at the same temple; and some suggested that the BAROC restrict these developments.⁵⁹ According to the Chinese monk Dongchu in 1950, “. . . There are more

than two thousand Buddhist monks, nuns, and *zhaijiao* women in Taiwan; (the number of monks is less than one-tenth of the nuns). Less than ten percent of them ever directly received the real [sic] Buddhist education.”⁶⁰

Turning to “skillful means,” some monks realized the necessity of developing the nuns’ order, and over time, came to emphasize the Buddhist teachings on equality and have invested time and resources in Buddhist women’s education and training, while, relatively speaking, in comparison with the situation in other Buddhist countries, they have muted other teachings regarding female pollution, female deficiencies, and female karmic burdens found in Buddhist literature.⁶¹

“Instead of complaining about the decrease of monks, Ven. Baisheng encouraged Chinese monks to ordain and educate Taiwanese nuns in order to maintain the Buddhist heritage in this period of transmission and wait for an increase of monks in the future.”⁶² For example, Baisheng (a leading monk who served as BAROC president several times) sponsored nuns to attend summer study retreats and together with nuns, Baisheng founded the Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka Institute, while Yinshun established the Fuyan Buddhist Institute for Women, Cihang founded the Maitreya Inner Hall, and Xingyun founded the Shoushan Buddhist Institute.⁶³

Asserting that “Buddhist women should lead Buddhist women,”⁶⁴ Baisheng realized the need for more female instructors and masters at ordination platforms to attend to the many female candidates at ordination.⁶⁵ As so many women sought ordination, Baisheng encouraged training of both nun ritual masters to teach the correct body postures for monastics, and nun ordination masters to ask the proper questions of female ordinands.

Baisheng may not have foreseen what the ultimate result of his promotion of nuns as ritual and ordination masters together with his strict propagation of the *vinaya* would be: nuns working for the re-establishment of the dual ordination system. Li Yuzhen argues that the phenomenon of dual ordination, which “had been absent from the Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries,” is another reason for the strength of the nuns’ order in Taiwan in recent decades,⁶⁶ but took several decades of struggle to establish. The learned and experienced nun Yuanrong (1905–1969) held an ordination for nuns at the Mt. East Chan nunnery in 1957 that was boycotted by nearly all monks. But Baisheng encouraged the Hong Kong nun Foying to produce an *Annotation of the Bhikkhunī Vinaya* in 1961, which Baisheng used to train nuns, and Foying herself became a popular lecturer at Taiwan’s nunneries.⁶⁷ At the urging of nuns, Baisheng held the first dual ordination at Linji Temple, Taipei, in 1970 without much incident; but Yuanrong’s disciple nun Tianyi (1924–1980) met with great censure and controversy when she took charge of a *bhikkhunī* ordination at the Longhu Nunnery in 1976.⁶⁸ Except for Baisheng, the other male ordination masters quit, but junior monks filled their places on the ordination

platform; Xingyun and his nun disciple Yikong participated as well. Many nunneries sent their novices to be ordained, and after many obstacles, the 1976 ordination was successfully carried out and marked a breakthrough for dual ordination in Taiwan. Since the 1980s, Taiwan Buddhists have regularly held dual ordinations in Taiwan and abroad.

In addition to empowering nuns through their training as ritual and ordination masters, gaining invaluable administration and leadership experience, "(t)he process of dual ordination entails the transmission of the lineage from senior *bhikkhunis* to novices, confirming a sense of shared identity and commitment among women from generation to generation."⁶⁹

Yet another aspect conducive to development of the nuns' order in Taiwan was the leading monk Yinshun's emphasis on the doctrines in Buddhism that advocated gender equality:

Buddhism has made no distinction between men and women in faith, correct practice, wisdom . . . Women and men, both and alike, can practice the Way and reach liberation . . . Women are wise and strong, and at the same time not inferior.⁷⁰

Significantly, in March 1965 leading masters Yinshun and Shengyan agreed that Taiwan's Buddhists need not "overly stress" the Eight Special Rules that historically kept nuns in an inferior and subservient position to monks, and instead, Taiwan's Buddhists should stress Buddhist teachings on "equality."⁷¹

However, not all Buddhists in the post-war era were so pragmatic and open-minded as to encourage the nuns' order, and the Buddhist leadership still worried about how to recruit new monks. In the mid-1960s, Japanese scholar Fujiyoshi Jikai, upon visiting Taiwanese temples, wondered if an overly lax or flawed ordination process was the reason for the "strange" phenomenon of more nuns than monks in Taiwan. In response, a writer using the pen name "Chun Lei" wrote a scathing article entitled "Taiwan's Buddhism That's Lost Its Brightness." Without considering at all women's religious belief or any other positive motivation on the part of women, without taking into account any other special characteristics of Taiwan's religious history, the author points the blame at two reasons: First, the prevalence of "adopted daughters" (*yangnu*) in Taiwan, and second, the unrestrained and flawed ordination process, which basically functions as "a nun-manufacturing place"; a meal-ticket trade exchange; a market. He refuses to explain more about Taiwan's *yangnu* (or precisely how *yangnu* and flawed ordination processes are related) saying that *yangnu* is "too big a topic," but if we read between the lines, he implies that many adopted daughters, once grown up, are unable to find a job or marry so become nuns as a means of survival.⁷²

The author claims that at Taiwan's ordination ceremonies anyone is accepted, without asking motivation, personal background, or education level. "Such a 'manufacturing-place,' *zhizao suo*, produces monastics who only seek donations and build temples, become abbots/abbesses, accept disciples, and chat about myths; these monastics are abnormal outgrowths, excrescences, completely useless to the world. . . . The fact that nuns are numerous does not mean Buddhism is thriving; proof of progress in Buddhism is high-quality monks."⁷³

"Chun Lei" obviously holds ugly biases against women and Buddhist women. While the larger issue of whether Taiwan's ordinations in the 1950s–60s were lax or irregular cannot be explored here, it suffices to say that respected monks such as Ven. Shengyan and others also were concerned about the ordination processes and insufficient education resources and facilities to train monks and nuns.⁷⁴ But to single out Buddhist women for censure is unfair and inaccurate. Many ordination candidates were indeed *zhaijiao* women, but demobilized soldiers came as well. Some ordination candidates, both male and female, were in fact illiterate or minimally educated, some were very old and looking for food and shelter, others not sound in body or mind,⁷⁵ but we are not told precise statistics or details. Furthermore, being illiterate did not hinder the monk Ven. Guangqin (1892–1986) from becoming a famous Pure Land/Chan master in Taiwan, who taught several generations of monastic and lay disciples.⁷⁶ Chinese Buddhist history was filled with examples of illustrious male and female Buddhists who may have been poorly educated or "illiterate," yet still had knowledge of Buddhist scriptures through oral transmission, not to mention possessing great insight and wisdom.

Still, the post-war Buddhist leadership in Taiwan continually strove to attract young men to become monks in a society offering men many choices for successful secular career: a society in which sons were, as ever, expected to provide their parents with grandsons and life-long economic support. Furthermore, in Taiwan, unlike the general situation in Thailand or many Tibetan Buddhist communities, other religious "economies of merit" competed with the Buddhist one in garnering male resources and talents.⁷⁷ Probably the most successful conduit to recruit young monastics was through the Buddhist campus movement, the *dazhuan xuefo yundong*. Following the practice of Catholic and Protestant proselytizing methods among Taiwan's young people, from the late 1950s Buddhist monastics and women and men of Buddhist lay organizations such as the Lotus Societies began to establish study groups and scholarships in vocational schools, high schools, and universities, and issued popular publications and tapes of instructional lectures, Buddhist sūtras, prayers, and songs, etc.⁷⁸

The layman Zhou Xuande (1899–1988) was a major leader in the Buddhist campus movement, starting in 1958. Zhou, like many Buddhist revivalists

of the early twentieth century, was concerned that Chinese students should not lose their own Confucian-Buddhist moral culture in the face of the forces of Westernization and Christianity. Zhou lamented that “[i]n Taiwan’s Buddhist environment, women outnumber men, the old outnumber the young, there is no distinction between the gods and Buddha, the Buddhist environment is superstitious and passive/pessimistic, all this needs active rectification.”⁷⁹

Thus, the purpose of junior colleges and university campus study groups, with their lectures, camps, and scholarships, *was to attract male students in particular*, and many young men did decide to become ordained, yet still, in the long run, more women were recruited through the *dazhuan* Buddhist study groups, because increasing numbers of young women received secondary and higher education after 1968, when the government instituted a compulsory, universal, nine-year education system. Thus, the overall high level of co-education in Taiwan is another factor advantageous to the growth of the nuns’ order, compared with other nations with a Buddhist heritage. As Shi Jianye comments, “after 1945 . . . [Taiwan’s] nuns’ growth occurred simultaneously with the [socio-economic] development of Taiwan . . . and rise in women’s status.”⁸⁰

The Diversity of Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan

Taiwan is renowned for its highly educated nuns, outstanding in fields such as education, social service, and the arts.⁸¹ A pioneer in several fields is Ven. Hiuwan (b. 1913 in Guangzhou, d. 2004, Taipei County), an artist of the Ling’nan school and a poet who became the first ordained female disciple of Tanxu, the 44th Patriarch of the Tiantai School in China (Figure 1.2, next page). She was also the first nun to teach at and become head of a graduate institute in Taiwan, the Chinese Cultural University in Taiwan; and her Lotus Buddhist Ashram has trained nuns for decades. At age seventy-six she decided to establish Huafan University (financed in part by selling her own paintings), the first Buddhist university in Taiwan to be recognized by the Ministry of Education.

Another pioneer is Ven. Heng Ching (b. 1943 in Taiwan) who became a nun in 1976 at Wanfocheng in San Francisco. She obtained her PhD at the University of Wisconsin, the first Buddhist nun to earn a doctorate from an American university, and became a full professor in the philosophy department at National Taiwan University (NTU). While at NTU she established the Center for Buddhist Studies, which is equipped with an academic library and extensive electronic databases. Heng Ching founded this Center with funds all donated by monastic and lay supporters: “Not a dime came from NTU.”⁸²

Foguangshan has produced many outstanding nuns who have been crucial to its development both in Taiwan and abroad.⁸³ One of Foguangshan’s



Figure 1.2. Master Hiuwan writing the Chinese character for “Buddha” (Shih Jenlang)

protégés (and prodigies) is Ven. Yifa. Born in 1960, she became a nun in 1979, received a law degree from National Taiwan University, and her doctorate from Yale University. She teaches at Boston University and is closely involved with Foguangshan’s University of the West; her areas of expertise include history of Chinese Buddhism, *vinaya* studies, women’s equality in Buddhism, and interfaith dialogue.

Another nun with perseverance and creative vision is Liaoyi (b. *circa* 1960) of the Lingjiu Mountain monastery, founded by the Chan monk Xindao. Liaoyi is the main force behind the planning and operation of the Museum of World Religions (2001) in Taipei County; this museum is the first of its kind in the world.

Subsequent chapters in this book will focus on Zhengyan (b. 1937 in Taiwan) and Chao Hwei (b. 1957 in Myanmar). Zhengyan leads the large, international Ciji Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation. Although over the past decades Zhengyan has cultivated a small core of nun disciples, the Ciji Foundation focuses on the philanthropic activities undertaken by its numerous lay-followers. Chao Hwei is an indefatigable academic and social activist; she is among the few self-proclaimed Buddhist feminists in Taiwan.

Yet Jiang Canteng reminds us of the varieties of Taiwanese nuns and temples besides the above-mentioned “star nuns” and nuns from international, high profile and resource-rich temples.⁸⁴ Women may choose to join one of

numerous smaller monasteries situated in or outside major cities. These monasteries may concentrate on performing Buddhist funeral rituals and holding periodic public ceremonies to “alleviate disasters and pray for blessings,” or offer services such as columbaria pagodas (to store the ashes and bones of the deceased). One of the many examples of such a small-scale temple is the Benyuan Temple in Kaohsiung city.⁸⁵ This group of six nuns, who chose to join this temple rather than others in their area, is devoted to the Dizang (Earth-Treasury) Bodhisattva who made a vow not to rest until all suffering souls in hell are freed. They focus on Tiantai Chan practice and offer classes on meditation, sign language, and English to the local community.

Li Yuzhen mentions two other nuns, both with advanced education, devoted to Dizang. One nun, Dijiao, famed for her talents as a spiritual medium able to communicate with ghosts, has founded a nunnery and five meditation halls in Taiwan and six branches abroad. Another nun, Jingding, among her many achievements has founded several nunneries and *dharma* halls, helped Ven. Hiuwan build Huafan University, and developed a walking meditation practice.⁸⁶

Monastics leading an ascetic and eremitic life centered on meditation are rare in contemporary Taiwan, but the nun Fuhui of Miaoli was one such example. Fuhui became famous for her miraculous healing and exorcistic powers; and her small temple is still a popular site, even after her death in 1985, for pilgrims seeking cures through the Great Compassion water blessed by Fuhui.⁸⁷

Other types of nuns include:

Independent nun: As mentioned above, National Taiwan University professor of philosophy *emerita* Ven. Heng Ching is an independent nun not affiliated with any temple and has devoted her life to teaching and scholarship. Another independent nun is Ven. Rongzhen. Born *circa* 1957 into a poor fisherman's family, she was unable to attain much education until she became a nun at Ven. Chao Hwei's Hongshi Institute in Taoyuan. Battling ill health, she lives by herself in a small Buddhist shrine in a Pingdong (Pingtung) County village, holding Buddhist classes and ministering to her neighbors who face serious problems with unemployment and alcoholism.⁸⁸

Nun with charitable lay foundation but no nun disciples: Lianchan (b. *circa* 1960 in Tainan) founded the Wuyan Association for the Protection of the Blind to teach the sight-impaired life-skills and Buddhism. Lianchan is a practitioner of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism, is a calligrapher, and is editing a series entitled *Biographies of Taiwanese Nuns*.⁸⁹

Nun living at a temple, but working elsewhere: Shanhui became a Buddhist nun in 1971 at Biyun Temple in Tainan County and in 1985 moved to Qianguang Temple in Jiayi (Chiayi) County. From the start she taught courses in Buddhism to local laypeople and in 1990 began to teach classes of 300 to 500 men in the Tainan Penitentiary. She also has taught classes of up to 2,000 at the Central Military Prison and the Jiayi Penitentiary. She has developed her own teaching materials and has acted as a mediator during times of prison unrest. Besides her prison classes, she holds night courses in Buddhism for laypeople. She devotes the entirety of each week to teaching and is exempt from temple administration and ritual duties. Her nun disciples carry out the tasks of chanting Buddhist sūtras at ceremonies such as funerals and groundbreaking rituals. Except for laypeople who help with classroom organizational matters, Shanhui works by herself. She has been awarded many achievement and service awards by local and central government officials.⁹⁰

As the foregoing examples indicate, many Buddhist temples in Taiwan do not expressly refer to the term *renjian fojiao* nor claim links with or inspiration from Masters Taixu and Yinshun, but nonetheless utilize modern methods of organization and proselytization to “create a pure land on earth.” One such example is Henan Temple, founded in 1967 by the monk Ven. Chuanqing, a disciple of the Chan-Pure Land Master Guangqin. Located in a scenic spot overlooking the sea near Hualian (Hualien), Henan Temple has twenty-one nuns, ranging in age from around twenty to sixty, many of whom are college educated and had prior work experience. The nuns carry out the standard Buddhist daily and year-round ceremonies as well as hold meditation sessions, but their special mission, begun by their master Chuanqing, focuses on propagating the *dharma* through the arts, literature, music, and multimedia presentations. More extensive research into the differences among Taiwanese Buddhist temples is necessary to assess the extent to which the body of doctrines and practices in modern Chinese Buddhism associated with the term *renjian fojiao* has or will become the mainstream in the Taiwan Buddhist world. With few exceptions, Buddhist nuns of all sects and lineages in Taiwan fully employ modern technologies and methods of organization, proselytization, and education, and do not shun but seek engagement with society and “this world.”

Why Become a Nun?

In different times and places, women have become Buddhist nuns for various psychological and socioeconomic reasons, and scholars who seek to recon-

struct the history of Buddhist nuns must be aware of the tendency toward idealization in religious biographies, as well as be skeptical of the stereotypes and slander found in anti-clerical literature.⁹¹ With this caveat in mind, some main points known about the history of the Chinese *bhikkhuni sangha* can be summarized as follows. While the earliest reference to Buddhism in China dates from 65 AD,⁹² the first monastery for monks is said to have appeared in the second century, and the earliest known nunnery was founded in the fourth century. These early nuns had received ordination from monks only.⁹³ In the fifth century, delegations of nuns from Sri Lanka enabled the lineage of full *bhikkhuni* ordination to be established in China, and thereafter, nuns' communities grew apace, with some nunneries supporting hundreds of resident nuns.⁹⁴

Biographies of monks throughout Chinese history abound, following the example of Huijiao's *Gaoseng zhuan, Lives of Eminent Monks*, published in 530 AD. For nuns, however, the sole equivalent account in the pre-modern period is the *Biqiuni zhuan, Lives of the Nuns*, (517), written by the monk Baochang, who describes the lives of sixty-five eminent nuns from the fourth to sixth centuries, of varying ages and marital statuses but from mostly elite and learned family backgrounds. Among these nuns were ascetics, contemplatives, teachers, and administrators, as well as examples of nuns undertaking self-immolation as an offering to the Buddha and to all sentient beings.⁹⁵

In response to the Confucian critique that to "leave home," *chujia*, violated the strictures of filial piety and thus subverted the social order, Buddhists answered that, on the contrary, becoming a monastic is "the ultimate act of filial piety," for by undertaking prayers, rituals, and good works, one could help one's parents attain a better rebirth or even freedom from cycle of rebirth.⁹⁶ *Lives of the Nuns* recounts, for example, that An Lingshou wanted to become a nun but "... her parents opposed this decision and criticized her as selfish and unfilial." Lingshou responded by saying: "I am setting myself to cultivate the Way exactly because I want to free all living beings from suffering. How much more, then, do I want to deliver my parents from human form!"⁹⁷

In recent decades, the pioneering research by Li, Levering, Hsieh, and Grant has documented for the Tang, Song, Ming, and early Qing periods many examples of female *dharma* masters and abbesses with lay and monastic disciples; some of these nuns had powerful connections to imperial and literati circles. These scholars have illuminated a long tradition of Chinese nuns renowned for their teaching, institution-building, literary accomplishments, ascetic practices, and charity works.⁹⁸

In 1939, the monk Zhenhua (1908–1947, an artist and scholar from Zhenjiang, Jiangsu) published a sequel to Baochang's *Lives of the Nuns* that includes the biographies of 248 nuns from the Tang-Song, Ming, Qing, and Republican periods.⁹⁹ It is particularly important to note that Zhenhua found records pertaining to eighty-six nuns from various periods and regions

during the Qing dynasty, records which help fill the glaring gap regarding the lives and practices of nuns during this period.¹⁰⁰ These nuns were devout practitioners of Chan and/or Chan/Pure Land traditions, and a number of them spent years in sealed confinement (*biguan*).¹⁰¹ Zhenhua describes nuns whose outstanding Buddhist practice attracted nun and lay disciples; some were memorialized by Confucian elites and some left *yulu* (discourse records), many were skilled poets as well.¹⁰²

Contrary to Confucian moralists' generalization of nunneries as "refuges of last resort" and nuns as social outcasts, these nuns' socioeconomic and educational backgrounds varied: Like nuns in previous dynasties, some hailed from Imperial families; some were raised in Buddhist families and were sent to nunneries as children; some joined nunneries as young women with their parents' blessing (sometimes sisters and/or cousins joined together); some became nuns to avoid arranged marriages; and some were widows.

The twenty-seven Republican biographies of nuns included in Zhenhua's book relate details about the nuns' family backgrounds, the nuns' place of ordination and their interactions with monks, local officials and laypeople, and their pilgrimages throughout China, Tibet, and abroad.¹⁰³ Again, Zhenhua portrays the nuns as active agents engaged in study, teaching and writing, building nunneries, institutes, and lay associations, and organizing charity missions; and as exemplary practitioners, whether chanting, meditating, or undertaking ascetic practices. Zhenhua's work awaits a full and detailed analysis that will, in particular, shed light on the lives and works of Buddhist nuns during the Qing and Republican periods.¹⁰⁴

In Taiwan, despite its long tradition of Buddhist and *zhaijiao* women and the contributions of the post-war pioneering generation, nuns were, until the 1980s, often stereotyped as illiterate, poor, and as social outcasts.¹⁰⁵ But Li Yuzhen's study points out that some nuns came from wealthy families and/or famous Buddhist families. Furthermore, Li inquired into the cases of women aged 20 to 30 years becoming nuns before the 1980s and found that contrary to popular stereotype of these women as being unfilial, selfish, and "fleeing marriage," the young women had in fact sacrificed education and marriage opportunities to take factory or other jobs to support their families, widowed mothers, and younger siblings, especially younger brothers, and only after many years of carrying out arduous familial duties did they become nuns.¹⁰⁶

Many nuns grew up in families who worshipped Guanyin, the Bodhi-sattva of compassion or the Eternal Mother, *Wusheng laomu*, a millenarian deity. Some had grandmothers or other older female relatives who were nuns, or mothers who, when young, were thwarted from being nuns.¹⁰⁷ Death or sickness of a parent or relative also influenced some young people toward Buddhism and the monastic path.¹⁰⁸ For many nuns, the point of entry into the orthodox Buddhist world was participation in Buddhist study groups in

vocational schools, high schools, and universities.¹⁰⁹ Young women engaged in the study of arts and sciences, business, computer science, or vocational training hope to pursue more intensive study of Buddhism as a means of self-cultivation, toward the goal of enlightenment. Many nuns told me that learning about Buddhist doctrines and practices was opening a door to an entirely new world of spiritual development that had been completely absent from the Taiwan education system.

As these young women move from the secure and highly-protected harbor of the Taiwanese family and educational system into the world, they often grapple with questions involving identity, family, and relationships. Ven. Jianduan became a nun at age twenty-four not due, as many people in Taiwan assumed of Buddhist nuns, to an unhappy family life, setbacks in a romantic relationship, or unsuccessful studies. She recounts that her childhood was very happy, and she grew up with parents who treated their daughters and son equally; she never knew about "gender discrimination" until she reached college. But even as a child she realized that all human relationships eventually must end, and each of us must face the fact of being alone and relying on oneself. During her first year of college, Jianduan learned about the life of the Buddha and realized that the *dharma* taught the way to live life and find happiness in and by oneself. Besides caring about one's family, is there a way to be concerned with other things? So in college she assiduously studied Buddhism and upon reading Buddhist teachings on life's impermanence, was deeply moved, pondering, What do I want? What do I really want to accomplish in this life? How can I make my dreams become reality?¹¹⁰

At this juncture, young women, as Jianduan did, may consider entering monastic life, but must pass through the intensive, multi-step process of observation, examination, and evaluation necessary to reach the novitiate stage.¹¹¹ Some young women drawn to the possibility of the monastic life already possess skills in the areas of counseling, medicine, and children's education. Others are teachers who feel that they have reached a limit in the significance and effectiveness of their pedagogy, and find in Buddhism unmatched spiritual and philosophical inspiration. Still others consider careers in academia, publishing, communications, the arts, social work, adult or community education, or active social service, all of which are possible by joining one or another monastic community, each defined by an emphasis on its own particular missions. Another feature that may attract a woman to monastic life is that monasteries often sponsor the graduate studies for their nuns in Taiwan or abroad. For some women, this may represent their only chance to obtain advanced degrees.

Of course, it is not necessary to become a nun to develop one's individual career or spiritual path; one can remain a lay practitioner of Buddhism. Therefore, the purpose of the pre-novitiate and novitiate screening process

is to identify those who are willing and able to uphold the precepts for a lifetime and are suited to living and working in a very disciplined, communal setting. Equally important is to identify those who are dedicated to furthering the interests and missions of that particular monastery. Finally, no matter what form their secular mission may take, the central responsibility of every monastic is to propagate the *dharma*.¹¹² Without sincere motivation and unusual strength of character, it would be very difficult to uphold the precepts and remain one's entire life in the sangha.¹¹³

The Question of Feminism

Having created such a strong and flourishing *bhikkhuni* order, we might assume that Buddhist women in Taiwan have identified or allied with the feminist movement, defined as working to gain equal opportunities for women, as well as to improve their legal status and quality of life.¹¹⁴ Also, initiated by feminist Buddhists in the late 1980s, a global movement has developed to attain greater gender equality in Buddhist institutions and to work for the welfare and rights of Buddhist women worldwide.¹¹⁵ Do Taiwan's nuns identify with, and are their views congruent with, those of the Taiwanese or international feminist movements? One might first draw this conclusion after observing the many self-reliant, self-administered communities of highly talented and hard-working Taiwanese Buddhist women. Yet when asked, the nuns cited their own hard work and essentialist notions of gender rather than credit the struggles of the feminist movement to explain the nuns' "success."¹¹⁶ The nun Shanhui told me that women possess a mother's compassionate and warm heart and thus are suited for the life of the Bodhisattva's path.¹¹⁷ Yikong believes that "(men) . . . are individualistic and want to establish their careers. Even if they become *bhikkhus*, they are reluctant to be bound by monastic rules. Women are gentle and yielding, and feel comfortable living in groups, so they are more likely to settle into long-term monastic life."¹¹⁸ Jingxin claimed that women suffer more, and can better endure hardships and hard work than men, so are better suited for the monastic life.¹¹⁹ Heng Ching asserted that women by nature are inclined to excel in the fields of culture, [secular] higher education and scholarship, Buddhist education, and adult/community education. Even the feminist Chao Hwei maintains that nuns have succeeded in Taiwan in propagating Buddhism due to their "gentle feminine nature, which makes people feel like they have been bathed by spring winds."¹²⁰ The so-called feminine virtues of compassion, nurturance, and conciliation are argued, in a perfect example of "skillful means," to correspond precisely with Buddhist virtues, thus women's strength lies in their difference.¹²¹

In fact, the flourishing of the nuns' order in Taiwan developed parallel to, not in coordination with, feminist movements in Taiwan or abroad. Nuns see themselves as working for the good of Taiwanese society as a whole, not especially for women's rights. Nuns say that they built the nuns' order through hard work and sacrifice, without the aid of feminist theory or praxis.¹²² Many women interviewed for this book believe that women's progress in Taiwan over recent decades is the "natural result" of Taiwan's overall "progressive development," rather than acknowledge the feminist movement's contributions. Similarly, one theme that Li Yuzhen stresses in her dissertation is that the priority of Taiwan's nuns' struggle over the years has been to legitimize their monastic identity without openly challenging patriarchal society.

Conclusion

It would take a separate book or two to satisfactorily treat all the topics addressed in this chapter. Much research is still necessary to excavate the histories of three topics in particular: Buddhism in Qing Taiwan, nuns in Qing and Republican China, and nuns and other Buddhist women in pre-1949 Taiwan. This chapter devoted many pages to a historical review in order to show how the nuns' order in contemporary Taiwan is revitalizing the long tradition of Chinese nuns teaching, writing, and meditating, building institutions, and undertaking ascetic practices and charitable works. However, we must also point out a number of modern developments that are special to Taiwan's Buddhism: unprecedented support by monks for the education and career promotion of nuns (beginning in the Japanese colonial period); nuns' empowerment through the dual ordination system; leading monks' stress on the doctrines of equality in Buddhism; a lax attitude toward observance of the "Eight Special Rules"; a weak (and after 1987, decentralized) Buddhist authority structure; a high degree of religious freedom; the "Buddhist campus movement" to recruit young monks and nuns; and Taiwan's Buddhists' valorization of "feminine" and "maternal" traits.

These aforementioned features, in tandem with a developed economy, helped create a Buddhist environment in which a variety of nuns could prosper, including the nun Zhengyan and her Buddhist Ciji Compassion-Relief Foundation. We now turn to a discussion of Zhengyan, because she is the only nun heading one of the major Buddhist organizations in contemporary Taiwan (the Foguanshan, Fagushan, and Zhongtai Chan organizations are led by monks born in China), and because Zhengyan's teachings and practice embody what it means to be Buddhist and female for thousands of women in Taiwan.