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RESISTING MARRIAGE AND RENOUNCING WOMANHOOD:

The Choice of Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns

Hillary Crane

ABSTRACT: The traditional Chinese perception of Buddhist monastics is that they choose to renounce the world out of desperation — after failing in the world such that their only options are suicide or the monastery. That this perception of the monastic life persists in Taiwan today is evident in monastics' own descriptions of their families' responses to their choice as well as in several recent scandals related to monastic life. Despite the widespread negative perception of monastics, increasing numbers of women are choosing this life. Drawing on extensive fieldwork with relatively new monastics, the author explores the choice Buddhist nuns make to renounce the world they know (and the possibility of leading lives like their mothers, sisters, and friends) and instead embrace the monastic life despite its negative image. The author argues that the nuns' choice is but a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing tradition of marriage resistance in Chinese culture and explains that, in the process of rejecting their lives as wives and mothers, Taiwanese Buddhist nuns reject their identities as women altogether.

Introduction

In the mid-90s, whenever I told acquaintances in Taiwan that I wanted to research Buddhist nuns, nearly all had an anecdote about someone they knew — a college classmate, a sister's friend, a cousin's ex-girlfriend — who had become a nun. These anecdotes all shared a similar pattern. Invariably, the young woman had been smart, attractive, and good in school. She was about to start a promising career and had good marriage prospects when suddenly she shocked her friends and family by shaving her head, renouncing the world, and joining a temple as a nun. The storytellers all found it very strange that successful women they knew would ever make this choice. "Everyone knows," they would say, "the only people who become monks and nuns are men who have suffered serious financial reversals, women who

cannot find husbands, or those reeling under the weight of personal tragedy.” In desperate situations such as these, conventional wisdom holds that people have two choices: the monastic life or suicide.

Despite assertions that successful people would not choose monasticism, the women I encountered in the course of my ethnographic research into why more people were electing to become monastics were what my Taiwanese acquaintances would call “successful”: they had money, good jobs, a good marriage, or, in the case of younger women, good prospects for all of the above. In fact, I met just one person whose life fit the conventional wisdom: a man who had lost his mother, father, and siblings all in one year, after which his house burned down taking his dog with it. He was then wrongfully imprisoned and his business failed. If this sorrowful story was supposed to be the norm, then I wondered why every nun I came across met the descriptions my acquaintances had given me. Those who were young (under twenty-five), had been successful in school, were heading for a good career, and had good boyfriends. They were likely to marry well because they were attractive, hardworking, and amiable. They were women with bright futures. In the case of those who had renounced the world in their thirties and forties, the women had not had particularly hard lives. They were wealthy by contemporary Taiwanese standards and described leaving good marriages. These were women who were leading good lives and their example called into question the stereotype of renouncing the world for having failed in it. What motivated such people to reject the world?

The belief that Buddhist monastics are those who have failed in the world has been well documented as widely held in historical Chinese culture, as I will discuss below. That the everyday discourse of present-day Taiwanese repeats this stereotype is not surprising or new. The surprise, as people I spoke with in Taichung remarked and as the monastics I interviewed illustrated, was the new type of people making this choice. People who had good lives were choosing to reject them in favor of living a life without friends or family. Repeatedly the stories I heard in Taichung revealed not that their tellers saw these “successful” monastics as the new norm or as transforming the stereotype. Each teller saw their “successful” monastic acquaintance as exceptions to the rule that all monastics are failures.

This article explores the rise in the number of women, mostly younger women, who are choosing the monastic life¹ despite the perception of their friends and families that their lives in the world are too good to force such a desperate decision.² Reviewing historical research, I will first relate the origins of the negative perception of Buddhist monastics, then, through a discussion of recent scandals, demonstrate that this perception persists. Next, I will discuss the “successful” lives that the nuns in my study had (or could have had) and the reasons they offered for rejecting them. In the process, I will review literature about contemporary Taiwanese women’s working and married lives and also reveal what the nuns I spoke with had to say about the lives they rejected when they renounced the world.

“Orphans,” “Widows,” and “Whores”

Portrayals of monastics found in historical documents and in literature do not cast them in a favorable light. Monastics are described as immoral and not truly committed to monastic pursuits. Nuns in particular are caricatured as vain, silly, and having crushes on handsome young men. Historian Susan Mann has examined the lives of women in Qing era China. In her book *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, she draws on women’s own writings in addition to other historical evidence to present a complex portrait of the multiple roles of women during that era. In this work she also explains that historic and literary depictions of monastics created and perpetuated the traditional perception of the monastic decision as springing from failure or tragedy. Buddhist temples of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) had a reputation for leading women out of the seclusion within the household’s inner chambers which propriety required of them. In “Collected Writings on Statecraft,” Qing dynasty official Wei Yuan describes how Buddhism corrupts women by leading them from home:

A woman’s proper ritual place is sequestered in the inner apartments. When at rest, she should lower the screen [in front of her]; when abroad, she must cover her face in order to remove herself from any suspicion or doubt, and prevent herself from coming under observation. But instead we find young women accustomed to wandering about, all made up, heads bare and faces exposed, and feeling no shame whatsoever! Some climb into their sedan chairs and go traveling in the mountains.... We even find them parading around visiting temples and monasteries, burning incense and holding services, kneeling

to listen to the chanting of the sutras. In the temple courtyards and in the precincts of the monasteries, they chat and laugh freely. The worst times are in the last ten days of the third lunar month, when they form sisterhoods and spend the night in local temples; and on the sixth day of the sixth month, when they believe that if they turn over the pages of the sutras ten times, they will be transformed into men in the next life.³

Mann points at that Wei Yuan's text goes on "to condemn the monks and priests who seduce these mobile women in much the same tone reserved for the nuns and other 'hags' who serve as liaisons between cloistered females and the outside world."⁴

Wei Yuan's stated dislike of monasteries and monastics was hardly unique. Mann offers this description of the corrupting nature of monastics — by Huang Liuhong, another Qing official:

Female intermediaries, such as marriage brokers, procuresses, female quacks, midwives, sorceresses, or Buddhist or Taoist nuns, often act as go-betweens for people indulging in sexual debauchery. Many innocent women from good families are enticed by these female ruffians to engage in licentious acts. The magistrate should...post notices to the effect that Buddhist and Taoist nuns should remain in their monasteries performing their religious services, and are not permitted to visit any household.⁵

In Qing China, Mann points out, fears of Buddhist teachings led to an association of Buddhism and monastics with immorality: "Official documents criticizing women's religious practices conflated Buddhist piety, sexual libido, and social disorder, including criminal activity."⁶ This fear of Buddhism led to scandalous claims against temples, as the following statement by the magistrate Huang Liuhong illustrates: "Women go to temples or shrines in droves and, on the pretext of burning incense and worshipping idols, they actually participate in orgies on the premises."⁷ Because of the challenge Buddhism posed to traditional Chinese values, all manner of wrongdoing was attributed to Buddhist monastics.

The following report, also from the Qing, suggests that the poor reputation of temples may have been deserved. It may also reveal the biases against monastics that were prevalent during the Qing and have survived in the Taiwanese imagination today:

The Zhiping Temple in Suzhou has twenty-two chambers. Like bottomless sacks in plentiful supply, they become havens for intimate encounters where women can indulge

their licentious passions without restraint. In 1759 the governor Chen Hongmou devised a scheme for discovering the facts about these rooms. He made secret arrests, searching for and seizing four women together with clothing, jewelry, and dowry objects beyond reckoning. He then sent officers to conduct a judicial investigation of all twenty-two chambers. They found illicit sexual activity in fourteen of them and accused sixteen monks of fornication, in addition to identifying twenty-five women as victims of rape. Chen then memorialized the throne, reporting that he had the offending monks in fetters and was remanding the case to the capital for sentencing by the Board of Punishment. He requested that the prisoners be beaten to death. In reply he received an imperial order that the monks be sent to Heilongjiang and given to the soldiers there as slaves.⁸

As Mann points out, although impossible to confirm, such charges were not unusual and served as the foundation of widespread beliefs about nuns. A popular saying from the Qing claimed that nine out of every ten nuns was a prostitute and the other was mad.

Given the poor reputation of monasteries, families in Qing-era China did not want their daughters to become nuns. Elite families, in particular, wanted to keep their daughters from making such a choice, as this quotation from *Dream of the Red Chamber* makes clear: “It would look very bad for a girl from a family such as ours to enter a nunnery. That really is unthinkable.”⁹ In this novel, a daughter of one branch of the Jia family expresses a desire to enter a monastery, an idea that was unwelcome:

The younger sister of the head of the Niguo Jias, Xichun, even vows to enter a monastery herself, causing great consternation....Xichun is portrayed as a devotee truly committed to chastity. Dismayed by her marriage prospects, she resolves to escape from sexual relations at any cost, insisting to her family that “Sutra-copying is the one thing I can do with conviction.”¹⁰

Xichun is unique in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in that she is truly devoted. Other nuns portrayed in the book do not appear to be motivated by piety, nor do they inspire reverence in the minds of the novel’s readers since they are depicted as promiscuous and not serious about their vows. One nun even falls in love with the best friend of the novel’s hero. According to Mann, *Dream of the Red Chamber* implies that most nuns come from the same background as low-class actresses, and are similarly “rented” to “perform” for special occasions.¹¹

Dream of the Red Chamber tells of another nun — in this case, one who had the respect of her upper-class family and who was encouraged to enter the monastery. But Mann explains that the family's reason for supporting their daughter in this choice was that they considered her to be “too sickly to marry.” In the novel, the young woman is described as follows:

She's said to be well read and know all the classics by heart. What's more, she is a very handsome young woman. She moved into this area with her teacher a year ago because of some relic of Kwanyin [Guanyin] she had heard about and because there are some old Sanskrit texts here that she wanted to look at.¹²

Although the young woman initially appears pure of heart and a true devotee, all is not as it seems, for even she “secretly longs for a passionate relationship, starting with her evident attraction to Baoyu and continuing through trances when she has fantasies about men vying for her hand in marriage and kidnapers carrying her off and raping her. A dramatic abduction scene makes this her ironic fate.”¹³

From all accounts in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* it would appear that nuns in the Qing emerged from both from elite families and from the poorest of the poor. While there were some of both, most came from inauspicious beginnings. In *Chinese Women Yesterday and Today*, published in 1937, Florence Ayscough describes the situation of women in China in the 1920s and 1930s in these words:

Women follow the way of religion for a number of reasons: Poverty drives parents to promise superfluous children of both sexes to this temple or that. Earnest Buddhists disapprove of such action contending that a child is unknowing...Illness, too, plays a role; parents often dedicate a sick child to celibate life as the price of its recovery. Rich widows become nuns. Little girls run away from brothels and offer themselves to a nunnery, or worn-out prostitutes seek peace within large temple walls.¹⁴

By reputation, most Qing-era nuns came from poverty and chose nunhood out of desperation. The exception, wealthy widows, may have become nuns as an alternative to suicide, as it was considered traditional and honorable for a widow to kill herself as a demonstration of devotion to her husband, while remarriage was frowned upon.¹⁵

Persisting Stereotype

Although no one I spoke with in Taichung knew anyone who had become a monastic out of desperation, the stereotype described above of monastics as failures persists. In part, this is because monastics make a choice that unsettles modern sensibilities just as it did in the past. Children are still expected to take care of their parents (or their husband's parents) in their later years and provide them with grandchildren. The grandchildren, in turn, all care for their grandparents in the afterlife so they do not become "hungry ghosts" with no descendants to make offerings to their spirits. Retreating to the temple and pursuing spiritual goals is perceived as selfish by those who remain behind. To monastics, of course, this act does not seem selfish — they see their spiritual practices as earning karmic merit for not only themselves but for all those around them. Monastics view taking the Bodhisattva vow — promising to continue being reincarnated even after achieving release from reincarnation in order to help all other sentient beings also attain release — a supremely selfless act of filial piety grander than what their own parents ask of them — to remain in the world and produce heirs.

Another reason for the persistence of negative images of monastics is that the Buddhist community in Taiwan in the 1990s was plagued by claims that its monastics were swindlers and scam artists. These allegations were due in large part to the widely reported, highly visible actions of a minority of monastics that reflected poorly on the whole community. Among other things, these scandals involved corrupt masters claiming supernatural abilities and doctoring photos of themselves (adding lightning bolts radiating from their bodies, or showing themselves hovering in mid-air), and, as some have confessed, swindling many Taiwanese out of millions of dollars.

Other negative impressions stem from the questionable involvement of certain temples in politics. Because Buddhist monastics withdraw from the world, most Taiwanese I spoke with believe that Buddhist monastics should stay removed from politics and other mundane, worldly interests and they question the motives of those who reemerge in order to weigh in on political issues. Fo Kuang Shan [Fo Guang Shan], a large monastic community in southern Taiwan drew international attention in 1996 when

its branch temple in southern California hosted a fundraiser for then Vice President Al Gore.¹⁶ The same temple was also quite involved in domestic politics in Taiwan: the Master spoke openly before the Gore scandal about the political directions he thought the island should take. In 1996 there was even a candidate with the strong support of at least one temple who ran for president on a platform of returning Taiwan to its “Buddhist roots.”¹⁷ Media attention on politically active temples reinforces the popular perception that monastics do not live up to the standards they set for themselves of removing themselves from worldly concerns.

The unusual public behavior of some nuns and unflattering fictionalized representations on television lead to negative perceptions of monastics as well. One nun in particular (whose credentials as a legitimate nun some of the people I spoke with in Taichung doubted) made regular appearances in Taiwanese game shows throughout the 1990s, singing and acting in skits. Most monastics describe this behavior as inappropriate; indeed, the behavior arguably violates at least some monastic precepts. Many immoral and silly characters in historical television comedies and dramas have been monastics. Several of the nuns I spoke with at **Zhi Guang Shan** temple attributed the negative perception of nuns particularly to these “silly *nigus*” (using first the English word and then the common word for nun: *nigu*). These images and characters so dominated popular culture that I was instructed never to use the word *nigu* in a temple because today in Taiwan nuns find it offensive and no longer identify with this term.

For most Taiwanese today, as with the families illustrated in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is a source of shame to have a family member become a monastic. In the English-language Chinese culture magazine *Sinorama*, one nun describes her family’s reaction to her decision to become a nun: “When I became a nun in the 1970s, people thought that becoming a nun was something for grandmothers and women who couldn’t support themselves, widows and abandoned wives. My father thought it was a huge loss of face that I wanted to be a nun and slapped me. I had to run away from home to do it.”¹⁸

Another reason Taiwanese parents object to their children becoming monastics is that to become a monastic means one will not produce an heir. This was particularly problematic for sons who

traditionally are supposed to carry on the family line. One of the lay residents of the temple where I lived was waiting for his parents' approval before he could become a monk. Having spent much money on his education, his parents objected, telling the young man that only when he married and produced a son would they allow him to become a monk. The Chinese believe parents *have* the right to make such demands on their children, as anthropologist Margery Wolf explains:

Unlike the American family in which parents are expected to put the needs of their children above all else, the Chinese family places the weight of obligation on the child. For the gift of life, a boy is forever in his parents' debt. He owes them obedience, deference, and the most comfortable old age his income can provide, and after they die he must continue to provide for them in the spirit world. He is also obliged to see that another generation is born to carry on the duties to the ancestors after his own death.¹⁹

One of my informants, certain that his married brother had produced a sufficient number of heirs, worked hard for two years to build a new home for his parents and otherwise fulfill his filial duty before becoming a monk.

As families are traced through the male line, one would think it mattered less if a daughter became a nun. Indeed, many of the monastics I interviewed said this was the reason nuns outnumbered monks. This may be true, but parents still appear to be upset at their daughters becoming nuns. Their distress has roots in the age-old Chinese distrust of monastics, as well as in Taiwanese folk beliefs that unmarried daughters come back to haunt their natal families after death. Anthropologist Rubie Watson describes the horror with which the death of an unmarried daughter is met: "A woman who dies before she enters her proper role as wife may become a vengeful ghost, a powerful enemy of her natal family and village".²⁰ Anthropologist Steven Harrell describes this belief:

[a] girl who dies unmarried cannot have a place as an ancestor on her father's altar. Her family can worship her in some back room somewhere, or donate her spirit table to a Buddhist "vegetarian hall," but in some cases they choose to find a husband for her, marrying her to a living man in a posthumous wedding...and having her spirit tablet enshrined on her husband's family's ancestral altar. In this way, a dangerous ghost, an anomaly in the family system, has been domesticated by placing her posthumously in the normal structural position of a wife and, at least for purposes of ancestor worship, a mother.²¹

An unmarried daughter, then, is a threat to her family after her death. Parents who have gone to great lengths to see that their daughters' spirits find homes are left in a spiritual bind when their daughters leave them behind and join a monastery. Particularly illustrative of negative perceptions of monastics in Taiwan was the scandal in the summer of 1996 at Chung Tai [Zhong Tai] temple in Puli. That year, after a summer retreat, over one hundred participants — mostly college students — decided en masse to become monastics. Their tonsuring was followed by intense media attention. Parents picketed in front of the monastery and sought assistance from police and politicians, claiming repeatedly to the media that the Master had brainwashed their children and that the monastery was preventing them from seeing their children. Eventually, the parents were allowed to meet with their children. Some of the children had second thoughts about the monastic life and returned home with their parents; others were forcibly removed by their parents. Some parents were persuaded to let their children remain. The conflict was the lead story in the news for some time and was covered by some western media outlets as well. As many of these new monastics were students at highly competitive universities, people expressed shock that they would throw away such promising futures and enter a monastery.

An event that happened during my first stay in Taiwan moved what had been private rumblings into the forefront of public discourse. It seemed that all at once people realized that the “isolated incidents” they were personally aware of were not so rare after all. Suddenly, throughout the island people had the same question I had: why were so many people who were not “failures” by community standards making this choice despite the negative perceptions of monastic life.

Wives and Workers

When I pursued this question with the nuns at Zhi Guang monastery, I was given the same answer repeatedly: the temple offered freedom from what awaited them in the world. Nuns I interviewed who had been married, and younger women who came to the temple before getting married, all said that life outside the temple offered few rewards. In part, their answers referred to the Buddhist belief that

attachments to the things and people of the world kept one stuck in the wheel of reincarnation — attachments with which women are more involved. However, in their examples and comments, they clearly show that their own lives and the lives of the women they knew — even the women who had achieved the success of contented marriages with children and steady incomes — were unbearable. And the options available to them in the world were not flexible enough to accommodate their desires to remain single and unencumbered.

With rare exceptions, women in Taiwan marry. Although the age at marriage has increased in recent years, by their mid-thirties more than 90 percent of Taiwanese women have married.²² By the time she is twenty-seven, my informants in Taichung and at the temple told me, a woman must marry or risk being labeled unmarriageable. An unmarried woman over thirty is asked with great regularity how she plans to find a man at such a late date and why she has been so picky. Even distant acquaintances of her parents offer to fix her up and chide her for remaining unmarried for so long. A friend of mine in Taichung, who was feeling the stress of remaining single into her thirties, told me that she would marry practically anyone who came along just to get everyone to stop pressuring her.

In the face of these social pressures to marry, the nuns in my study looked at the lives of the married women around them and weighed their options in light of what they saw. We can get a sense of these lives through the scholarship on recent generations of women in Taiwan, and through the nuns' descriptions of the lives of these women and how they represented what the nuns did not want for themselves. Anthropologists and other social scientists have studied the home and working lives of these women over the last few decades. In her foundational work on uterine kin, anthropologist Margery Wolf describes the home life of women in the 1950s and 1960s and argues that women assert their power in the family by establishing strong emotional ties to their sons. These ties are later tested by the son's relationship to his wife.²³ Researchers first explored the large influx of young, unmarried women and men into the growing factory system of the early 1970s.²⁴ Like the young men in factories who left to start their own businesses or return to family farms after getting married, young women also left the factories

when they married. The women who left the factories did not suddenly shift from an exclusively productive economic role to one of reproduction, however. Many continued to work either in very small factories, in family-owned businesses, or in their living rooms as piece workers. In her 1996 book *Living Rooms as Factories*, an analysis of the role of women in the Taiwanese small factory system,²⁵ sociologist Ping-Chun Hsiung explores these economic roles as well as the many other demands on contemporary Taiwanese women's lives. Unlike the women in Wolf's study, the women that Hsiung studied established their power in their husbands' families not just through emotional ties and their reproductive roles, but also through economic contributions and productive roles. Women often use their income to support their son's educational needs (or his "sweet tooth") and in return for this support — both emotional and financial — she secures her son's willingness to care for her in her old age. Hsiung observes that Taiwanese women today, like many women worldwide, are under two conflicting obligations: to contribute to the economic success of the family and caring for the social and emotional needs of the family at home.²⁶

Hsiung describes how many young married women are surprised to find that they are not living the romantic lives they read about in novels or see in movies and on television. Instead, they shoulder a double burden in their married lives: they are expected to earn wages for their new families or to work as unpaid labor for the family business, and they must also take care of their own children and the demands of the household. The women in Hsiung's study did not expect the hardships of their married lives — needing to clean up after their husband's entire family, cook all of their meals, and still continue to work outside the home. If a woman's marriage fails, she is often expected to continue providing for her children. Like many of the women in Hsiung's study, a friend of mine in Taiwan who had two young children worked about sixty hours a week in addition to taking care of her children and maintaining the household. Her husband had been in prison and was unable to keep a job after being released. Her life was quite difficult and she acknowledged that it would have been simpler if she had never married.

Several of the women in Hsiung's study had similar tales to tell of husbands who gambled or left them with the double burden of running the household and supporting it economically.

Hsiung expresses surprise that so many of the women she met had been naïve about the lives they would lead on marrying, but the fact remains that almost all women in their thirties expressed such sentiments when they spoke with Hsiung about their first years of marriage.²⁷ Perhaps these women were indeed naïve, as Hsiung concludes; but it could also be that social pressure to marry is so great that even women who are aware of how difficult married life will be succumb to that pressure. Married life seems unavoidable to most Taiwanese women, no matter what the burdens. Unlike the women Hsiung researched, the nuns I lived with at Zhi Guang Shan were quite aware of the married woman's fate and chose to resist it. In doing so they put aside family objections and dismissed society's negative images of monastics.

The nuns frequently discussed the difficult lives they would have led if they had not become nuns. They said of their mothers, aunts, and sisters that their lives had become even more burdensome in recent years in that they work full time at demanding jobs and yet are still expected to take care of all the household demands. Like several of the nuns I interviewed, the Venerable Chuan Ming,²⁸ chose to become a nun partly because she did not want to live a life like her mother:

On my second meditation retreat I first thought of becoming a nun. I knew I wanted to live a very different life, different from what I'd begun to live. I didn't want to live like my mother because I think she is very unhappy. I didn't want to go the same way. I thought if I become a nun then I can be a teacher and reach out to people with hard lives like my mother. I can teach them how to live a very different kind of life.

Another woman I interviewed the day before she was tonsured echoed the sentiments of many when she said simply, "for a woman, being married is tiring." Thus, the nuns in my study were aware of the dangerous path of marriage in ways that Hsiung's newlyweds appeared not to be. The nuns I studied decided that renouncing the world of their sisters and mothers was more appealing than remaining in the world and shouldering the double burden of being a wife and a worker.

Marriage Resisters

As discussed above, the souls of deceased unmarried women are thought to become restless ghosts because they have no offspring to attend them. This supernatural threat may be part of the reason most Taiwanese believe that only a woman without a family would choose to become a nun. Despite this threat, however, there have been periods in Chinese history when parents willingly let their daughters remain unmarried. Anthropologist Andrea Sankar and historian Marjorie Topley have studied the most notable of these anomalies: the silk workers of the Canton delta in mainland China. Their studies show that resistance to marriage has precedents in Chinese history, however rare they may have been.

From the mid 1800s to the 1920s groups of women who worked in silk factories took vows of celibacy and joined spinster sisterhoods, living together in “vegetarian halls.” This form of marriage resistance gained approval because of the belief that non-virgin women were harmful to the silkworms and because, as employed virgins, these women sent money home to their parents. They did not live at home, however, because of the belief in the sentiment behind the folk saying: “mature girls cannot be kept in the midst.”²⁹

In her account of the vegetarian halls of the Canton delta, Sankar tells a story of Jing Yih Sifu that illustrates contrasts and similarities between those women and the nuns at Zhi Guang.³⁰ Jing Yih Sifu came of age in Southern Guangdong at a time in the early part of the twentieth century when tens of thousands of women in the region were joining spinster sisterhoods and refusing to marry. She worked in the silk industry both on her father’s farm as a young child and in a factory as a teenager. Once she reached marriageable age, she began to resist marriage:

[g]irls when I was young...refused to marry at all! Instead we took a *sou hei* [literally, self-comber] vow and became spinsters. We held a hair-combing ceremony and a dinner banquet that resembled the wedding ceremony, where an unmarried girl changes her hair from that of a maiden, with two long braids, to that of a woman, with hair knotted in a bun. In our ceremony, the spinster’s hair is plaited in a single braid. This braid tells everyone that the woman has taken a vow of spinsterhood and celibacy.³¹

When her parents tried to arrange a marriage for her, Jing Yih Sifu confronted them saying that if they forced her to marry it would be like cutting off one of their arms because she was such a valuable worker. “They were silent for a long time,” Jing Yih Sifu said, “then my mother said, Very well, but you must promise to behave yourself.”³² Jing Yih Sifu’s hair-combing ceremony was very elaborate, much like a wedding banquet. After the ceremony, she moved from her home because:

[a] father cannot allow his spinster daughter to live in her natal home[;]...after the celibacy ceremony she is considered “married” and married women are forbidden to die at home. If she dies within her own kin group, then all the bad things that happen to her family will be blamed on her spirit. Instead, she can live only in a spinster house, and that house is the only place for her to die. A spinster must also build her spinster house in a different surname section from that of her family.³³

Sankar goes on to tell the rest of Jing Yin Sifu’s story, illustrating how the spinster sisterhoods represented an adaptation to economic changes in the region.

In many ways the nuns and the spinster sister’s lives differ. Jing Yih Sifu’s hair-combing ceremony was celebratory whereas the nuns’ tonsure ceremony is somber. Her parents accepted her decision because it allowed them to continue to reap the benefits of her labor, whereas the families of Taiwanese nuns do not derive any economic benefit from their labor. Indeed, according to the nuns I interviewed, families that object to their daughters becoming nuns often do so because they resent losing their daughter’s economic contribution. The lives of the “sisters” and the nuns at Zhi Guang Shan is similar, however, in that they have chosen to live apart and to avoid marry.³⁴ I conclude from my research that this desire to resist marriage is a major motivation for many of the young nuns in Taiwan today who join the temple.

Women Are “Narrow-hearted”

When Taiwanese women become Buddhist nuns, they renounce the world and turn their backs on the lives they would have had. But in fact they renounce even more: they reject their gender altogether.

The nuns I lived with and interviewed often described women as “slow,” “ungenerous,” “fragile,” “soft,” “tender,” and “emotional.” One well-educated nun, the Venerable Chuan Ming, who became a nun right after college, described herself before becoming a nun — and the other women in her family — as “emotional”:

In my family all the women always feel agitated. Like when someone dies, we feel sad, you know, like a girl. I had two sisters, and between the three of us, our moods were manic-depressive. For example, during autumn, because the wind blows and the leaves fall, women feel sad. Also, when we see old people, we will feel sad if they’re sick and there’s nothing we can do. When I was in college, I used to feel very upset every time I had to leave home to go back to school.... Girls, like me and my sisters, cry and feel sad, but not men. Men are steady in their emotions and they won’t argue about things.

The Venerable Chuan Ting echoed this statement, saying, “women are more emotional and sensitive. They think differently from men.”

Monastics also described women as indecisive. As one nun said, “Women think too much and are distractible. Men don’t get distracted. They are decisive and clear. Women say, ‘Oh, I’ll think about it later; I’m too tired.’ Men don’t do that.”

Not only do the nuns find the roles and character traits of women problematic, they also describe women as having a limited capacity for understanding profound teachings. At Zhi Guang, women were often described as “good at details, but not at understanding.” One of the projects I was involved in at the temple was the translation of some of the temple’s texts for their web site. These included the temple’s own *gong-an* (Zen riddles). All of the stories that involved women had them making mistakes, acting “girly,” not seeing the important meaning in something the Master says, or needing repeated prodding from the Master to understand a key concept. Conversely, the stories dealing with men all involved them being given a task to undertake and learning from it.

When the nuns describe women in these terms, they are not describing themselves as they currently are, as monastics. They do not personally identify with these characterizations except insofar as

they may describe who they used to be. They may have been like “women” in their previous lives, but now they see themselves as “men.”

Ethnographies and histories of Taiwan and China are full of smart and powerful women who overcome the limitations of the gender images under which they live by becoming classified as men. In other words, they overcome their gender by becoming its opposite — they become warriors and they are described as, and are understood to be, men. Because their gender is constructed by their behavior and their relationships, and is not thought of as a product of their bodies, these heroic women are able to change their gender identities through their actions.

Among the many examples of women in Chinese folklore and history who escape the lives of the inner chambers and take up careers or arms — thereby rejecting their female identities and becoming men — is the story of Mulan (also known as Hua Mulan or Fa Mulan). Although it varies in different versions, her story follows the same outline: she left home dressed as a man, and fought in the army for twelve years as a substitute for her ill father and for her brother who was too young to fight. For twelve years, the story goes, she fought valiantly and no one suspected she was a woman. After her years in the army ended, she returned home and changed back into her woman’s clothing, returning to her role as daughter and eventually wife.³⁵ (Only in the Disney movie does she fall in love with one of her fellow soldiers.) Mulan exemplified virtue by sacrificing herself for her father. To help him — to commit this filial act — she had to become a man, for as a woman (narrowly defined only as daughter or sister), there was no heroic or virtuous option available to her. She was only able to achieve the feats that made her famous by becoming a man.

In her 1970 dissertation, historian Roxanne Witke identified what she called a “Mu-lan complex” — a recurring theme in Chinese culture of a woman who disguises herself as a man and is accepted as a man, a warrior, or a scholar. Witke points out that these women are admired as “men,” in other words, precisely because they shed female traits and adopt the “higher” traits of men.³⁶ The motif manifests in several figures in Chinese history and myth including Mulan, the women generals of the Yang family,

Qin Liuyu, Liang Hongyu, and Xun Guan.³⁷ Latter-day women such as nationalist revolutionaries also invoked and identified with this hero image,³⁸ and the image persists in popular *gongfu* movies and historical television dramas today. Assuming these new roles means that women must stop being women and become men. This requires leaving the familial contexts that define them as women.

Traditionally, the appeal of the hero motif probably lay in the opportunity it provided for freedom from womanly limitations. Becoming a man also enabled women to fulfill a sense of filial duty, which they would otherwise be unable to fulfill as brides married out of their natal families. For the nuns in my study, the appeal lies in the hero motif's representation of limitations overcome and as a model for life outside the context of marriage and family. Nuns hope to overcome the roles and female qualities they believe were earned as a result of bad karma, and the hero motif provides them with a way to achieve this end by avoiding marriage.

This historical trope draws on a particular construction of gender, one that builds gender not on sex but on one's role in relation to others. In this model, the female gender only exists through one's relationships with men. According to historian Tani Barlow, prior to the twentieth century the Chinese had no inclusive concept "woman," only relationship-dependent terms such as mother and daughter.³⁹ Barlow argues that the words *nuxing* and *funu*, which developed due to Western influences and in the Marxist state respectively, had no imperial antecedent. There was no word that referred to the masses of women collectively. Because Barlow does not find a "woman" outside the family, she suggests that rather than theorizing women as women situated in the family we ought to grasp that it is in the family — as the effect of kinship structures — that women as women are produced.⁴⁰ Taking the argument a step further, she states: "The exchange of actual women in patrilineal, patrilocal Chinese kinship produced not the sign 'woman,' but a profusion of signs with one thing in common: though they all accommodated 'real' women, none could be reduced to a prediscursive category Woman."⁴¹

Thus, a female who was not acting in a relationship-dependent role (e.g., as a wife) was not part of an inclusive, independent category of "woman." The implication of Barlow's claim is that any person

not defined as mother or otherwise via a familial role was by default a man. While it may seem far-fetched to suggest that a female outside the family context was not understood to be a female at all, much evidence supports this position. Frequently in Chinese literature and histories, the genders are constructed in such a way that if a woman displays the traits of a man, and uses them successfully, she is classified as *zhangfu*, literally, husband or man. For example, historian Joanna Handlin discusses the sixteenth-century writer Lu Kun, who wrote a book about women of virtue. Lu frequently compares virtuous women with men and he “often unwittingly refers to his heroines as ‘fellows’ (*chang-fu*) [*zhangfu*], counting them among the ranks of men.”⁴² His use of the masculine term suggests that associating with women those behaviors and traits attributed to men transforms women into men.

The same was true of the nuns at Zhi Guang who described anyone of accomplishment as male. Ven. Chuan Wu, a nun I worked with closely at the temple, provided an example of this kind of logic: “We are women because we are greedy and noisy. If a female is open-hearted, kind, and compassionate, then she is a great man of virtue.”

Both in the historical texts and in temple discourse, women are not perceived as women while they are performing heroic feats — whether this means becoming a soldier or resisting pressure to marry and taking the Bodhisattva vow instead. They are men during those periods and therefore do not upset existing gender constructions in which women are not heroic. The idea of woman does not need to change to accommodate women acting bravely and heroically. Instead, these women are called *zhangfu*, fellows, and they thereby reinforce existing divisions of gender by character traits, behavior, and action, rather than by their bodies. A woman who acts like a man does not expand the idea of what a woman can be, instead her new behavior is reclassified to suit her as a man.

In his analysis of Chinese kinship, anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu suggests that because Chinese culture has generally constructed genders on specific roles, such as those achieved through marriage (rather than generalized as they are in the West), Chinese men are better able to treat a woman as her competence warrants once she has attained a position of prestige.⁴³ This is not to suggest it was easy for

women to attain such positions. Once they did, however, they were generally accorded the respect due to someone in that office. Thus, extrapolating from Hsu's statement, something like the American Navy's Tailhook scandal (in which women officers were sexually assaulted *as women* rather than treated *as officers*) would never have happened in Hsu's China. A woman officer would be treated like an officer, a category defined as male. It may be more difficult in traditional Chinese society for a woman to get there, but once there her treatment would be equitable.

Historian Mary Backus Rankin further develops Hsu's line of thought:

[a] woman who succeeded in breaking away from family bonds and becoming a teacher, doctor, revolutionary, etc., was likewise expected to act in accord with well-defined concepts of behavior, and others often gave her the recognition accorded a person in that role....Most of the serious roles outside the household were reserved for men. Thus when a woman did enter one of these roles, she also assumed their normally male characteristics.⁴⁴

Although traditionally the options available to women *as women* were quite limited, exceptional women like Mulan could shed womanly roles and take on male roles and male characteristics. In so doing they would be accorded the status of men.

Again, the statements of monastics at Zhi Guang express this viewpoint. A monk who studied engineering and worked in the temple's construction office told me, "After cultivating a long time, women correct their female habits. They appear more like males....Nuns who have cultivated for a long time will act and look like men." In the temple as in historical literature, therefore, gender does not derive from the sex of one's body, but rather from actions that create gendered relationships. Rather than the body being the source of gender differences, gender differences are the source of bodily effects. As Barlow explains:

[gendering] processes changed under different social and discursive conditions, and it produced bodily effects — the bound foot, for instance — marking the body as feminine. But at no time was gender ever "a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings"; it was always "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations" through deployment of "complex political technologies."⁴⁵

Increasing numbers of women whose communities believe them to be too good to make the choice are electing to become nuns. Despite popular perceptions that only failures would take this step, many successful women do. They are stigmatized in the process, but these women see the monastic life as a better alternative than remaining in the world and falling into difficult lives like those of their mothers, sisters, and friends. When they renounce the world and refuse to marry, they follow along paths worn by the marriage resisters of the silk factories and they draw on the model of Mulan. They too are women warriors who become men when they leave the family context behind.

To conclude, although those in the community around them continue to label them with traditional stereotypes and insist that the “successful” nun of their acquaintance is the sole exception to the norm, nuns increasingly highlight the difficulties and emptiness of a “successful” life when they freely choose the stigmatized life of the monastery.

Notes

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Footnotes

1. Taiwan is the only country where Buddhist nuns outnumber monks (Chatsumain Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* [Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991], 96). In most large temples, nuns make up 75 to 90 percent of ordained disciples. They have the same opportunities and responsibilities for teaching and studying the dharma as do monks (ibid., 96). One prominent Taiwanese monk recently remarked that nuns, rather than monks, are in charge of Buddhist education in Taiwan (ibid., 95). Between 1953 and 1986, in every year but 1961, more nuns were ordained in Taiwan than monks, sometimes by a ratio as great as three to one (Charles Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999], 152).

2. Research for this article is based on fifteen months fieldwork in Taiwan in which eight months were spent in Taichung attending meditation classes at a branch meditation center affiliated with a large monastery and participating in various meditation retreats. Another six months were spent living at a large monastery in a rural area of central Taiwan. The temple where I lived, which I have given the pseudonym Zhi Guang Shan, had about five hundred monastics in residence (and about the same number living in other locations on the island and abroad). Of those in residence, about three hundred and fifty were female. Most were relatively new monastics in that all had been tonsured within the previous ten years, and most within the previous three. I formally interviewed about fifty monastics (about forty of these were female) and conducted participant observation with many more through my daily work at the reception office (where I worked closely with nine nuns, one monk, and two lay women and regularly spoke with many others who frequented the office), through teaching English lessons, and through participation as a regular lay member of the community in daily routines and many special temple activities. Most of the nuns were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five; and almost none were over fifty.

3. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 221.

4. Ibid., 221.

5. Ibid., 191.

6. Ibid., 194.

7. Ibid., 195.

8. Ibid., 194-5.

9. Ibid., 190.

10. Ibid., 193.

11. Ibid., 192.

12. Ibid., 193.

13. Ibid.

14. Florence Ayscough, *Chinese Women Yesterday and Today* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1937 [1975]), 88-9.

15. Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 111.

16. Throughout this article, I use the mainland Chinese pinyin system of romanization. This system is not used in Taiwan. When I refer to proper names for people or places in Taiwan, I first present them as they are typically found in Taiwan and then offer the pinyin in brackets. I do the same when quoting English language texts that use other romanization systems.
17. “Religion Won’t Sway Voters: Poll,” *China News* 5 (March 1996). The candidate was Chen Li-an.
18. In Tsai Wen-ting, “Daughters of the Buddha” *Sinorama* 12 (1997): 3.
19. Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 14.
20. Ruby Watson, *Inequality among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 135.
21. Stevan Harrell, “Men, Women, and Ghosts in Taiwanese Folk Religion” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 108.
22. Hsiung Ping-Chun, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Bonnie Adrian, *Framing the Bride: Globalizing Beauty and Romance in Taiwan’s Bridal Industry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).
23. Wolf, *Women and the Family*.
24. Norma Diamond, “Women Under Kuomintang Rule: Variations of the Feminine Mystique,” *Modern China* 1, no. 1 (1979): 3-45; Lydia Kung, *Factory Women in Taiwan* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983).
25. Hsiung argues that this system is largely responsible for Taiwan’s “economic miracle.” The largest five firms produced less than 5.5 percent of the GNP in 1985 (in Hsiung, *Living Rooms*, 31), and 95 percent of Taiwanese factories had fewer than one hundred workers between 1971 and 1986 (*ibid.*, 29).
26. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
27. *Ibid.*, 96.
28. All subjects of my field research have been given pseudonyms.

29. In Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 80.
30. Andrea Sankar, "Spinster Sisterhoods: Jing Yih Sifu; Spinster-Domestic-Nun." in *Lives, Chinese Working Women*, ed. Mary Sheridan and Janet W. Salaff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
31. Ibid., 56.
32. Ibid., 57
33. Ibid., 58-59.
34. Another difference is that many contemporary nuns have been married. Topley's 1975 study includes a discussion of married women who resist marriage in a community similar to Sankar's.
35. Ayscough, *Chinese Women*; Roxane Witke, "Transformation of Attitudes towards Women during the May Fourth Era of Modern China" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1970).
36. Witke, *Transformation of Attitudes*.
37. Ibid.; Ester S. Lee Yao, *Chinese Women: Past and Present* (Mesquite, TX: Ide House, Inc., 1983), 66.
38. Mary Backus Rankin, "The Emergence of Women at the End of the Ch'ing: The Case of Ch'iu Chin." in Wolf and Witke, *Women in Chinese Society*.
39. Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: Funu, Guojia, Jiating," in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 254.
40. Ibid., 256.
41. Ibid., 257.
42. Joanna F. Handlin, "Lu K'un's New Audience: The Influence of Women's Literacy in Sixteenth-Century Thought." in Wolf and Witke, 23.
43. Francis L.K. Hsu, "Chinese Kinship and Chinese Behavior," in *China in Crisis*, ed. Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou, Vol. 1, no.2. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 592-94.
44. Rankin, "The Emergence of Women," 63.
45. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman," 259.