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# Becoming a Nun, Becoming a Man: Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns' Gender Transformation

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**Becoming a Nun, Becoming a Man:  
Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns' Gender Transformation**

Hillary Crane

**Abstract**

This paper explores apparent contradictions in the gender identifications of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns. Because the texts and teachings of their tradition provide conflicting messages about women's spiritual abilities, the nuns create a complex gender cosmology as a means to accommodate textual contradictions without rejecting any textual statements. This strategy allows the nuns to assert that they have spiritual abilities equal to those of men without rejecting or contradicting textual statements that they do not. Without denying that they are women (and that they are therefore threatening to men) the nuns primarily identify with the male gender. Compartmentalizing and contextualizing gender symbols allows the nuns to see themselves both as men and as women without contradiction.

Introduction

‘Master, are you a man or a woman,’<sup>1</sup> I asked a nun with whom I had been working at Zhi Guang monastery’s reception office for several months as we cleaned the Master’s conference room, preparing it for a meeting.

‘I am a man,’ she replied.

Trying to assess precisely what she meant by this I asked, ‘If you’re a man, why do you live apart from the monks in a residence with other nuns? Why do you sit on the women’s side of the dining hall and the women’s side of the meditation hall? Why do you use the women’s restroom?’

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Shifu, nin shi nan haishi nu?*’

She answered, ‘Although I am a man, it’s important for me to remember that I am a woman. My body is bad for the monks’ spiritual cultivation. What if a monk was close to enlightenment while he was eating and he suddenly saw me or we bumped into each other? I might distract him and interfere with his spiritual progress. My body is dangerous and must be kept apart from men.’

I asked again, ‘but you’re a man?’

‘Yes, I am a man,’ she replied.

During my field stay at Zhi Guang Chan monastery (a pseudonym) in central Taiwan, my many attempts to get nuns to clarify what I felt to be contradictory statements about their gender usually resulted in dialogues like this one. They would assert both that they were men and that they were women, often in the same breath. The same was not true for the monks who consistently identified themselves as men only. Over the course of my field stay, I came to understand the nuns’ gender identities as multiple and complex in that they draw on both masculine and feminine symbols, identifying with different gender symbols in different contexts.

This paper will show that these apparent contradictions are instead part of a strategy the nuns undertake to resolve conflicting statements found within the Buddhist texts studied at the temple. This strategy allows the nuns to assert that they have spiritual abilities equal to those of men without rejecting or contradicting textual statements that they do not. To accommodate textual contradictions without having to reject any textual statements, the nuns create a complex gender cosmology which entails juxtaposing exaggerated gender constructions in which men represent all things positive and women

represent all things negative. Without denying that they are women (and that they are therefore threatening to men) the nuns primarily identify with the male gender.

At the temple, women are discussed in two discrete contexts: as *samsara*-women, threats to male spiritual cultivation, or as ‘girly’ women<sup>2</sup>, individuals with constraints that limit their ability to achieve spiritual goals. When the nuns call themselves ‘women’ they mean the term in only a very limited sense; they are women only insofar as they have female bodies and therefore represent the threat of *samsara* to male spiritual cultivators. Identifying themselves as *samsara* women does not contradict their sense that in every other way, and most particularly as spiritual cultivators, they are men. In describing themselves as spiritual cultivators, the nuns juxtapose the role model of an ideal cultivator, the *da zhangfu* (heroic man), with that of the flawed, ‘girly’ woman -- two models built on textual assertions about men and women, which the monastics use to illustrate right and wrong behavior. This ‘girly’ woman is different from the *samsara* woman with which the nuns identify. As I will demonstrate, the nuns experience no contradiction when labeling themselves as *samsara* women and rejecting the ‘girly’ woman label. Nor do they reject the broad characterization of most women as possessing the traits of ‘girly’ women. Indeed, rather than refute negative portrayals of women with contradictory texts or positive worldly examples, they tell stories that reinforce the idea that most women have female-specific barriers to enlightenment. Yet, as the nuns confirm the negative view of women, they identify themselves as men. This male identification is supported by later texts that assert that there are no differences between the genders. Identifying themselves as men allows the nuns to reconcile the negative

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<sup>2</sup> Monastics often, even when speaking to me in Mandarin, would use the English ‘girly’. Most often when I use this term I’m simply borrowing it. Sometimes when I use ‘girly’ I’m using it as a translation for *xiang nuhaize*.

construction of women in the texts with their claim to have the same spiritual potential as men. Through compartmentalizing and contextualizing gender symbols the nuns are able to see themselves both as men and as women without contradiction.

### **Conflicting texts**

The Buddhist canon developed over many centuries and represents the thinking of several different schools. As such, the canon often contradicts itself, particularly on issues that fissured the tradition into different schools. One such debate involves the relative spiritual potential of women. Questions about the nature of women and women's relative spiritual abilities compared to those of men have been at the center of debates between the many schools of Buddhism, and even within a single school, the messages are rarely consistent. These messages range from asserting women's inability to reach any spiritual goals to arguing that gender itself is an illusion and that women face no greater spiritual challenges than men. The nuns at Zhi Guang have to perform some nuanced and complicated reconceptualizing of their gender identities in order to reconcile conflicts in the texts<sup>3</sup>.

Among the many texts read at Zhi Guang that describe women's flaws there are texts claiming that women have five hindrances that men do not share. There are texts suggesting that women are five hundred lives behind men on the path to enlightenment. Still others state that women do not have Buddha-like bodies. For example, texts that describe the thirty-two physical marks said to be possessed by all Buddhas have led many

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<sup>3</sup> Although some scholars of Buddhism have shown it is possible to analyze various textual messages about women in ways that either recast those most ostensibly sexist as meaning the opposite of what they appear to mean, or expose them as the output of narrow-minded, sexist monks at the fringe of the tradition, and, therefore, not representative of the true nature of Buddhist thinking (Gross 1993), the nuns at Zhi Guang try to adhere to and reconcile all of the textual teachings.

to argue that women cannot attain buddhahood. Of the thirty-two, the mark that most explicitly causes doubt about women's potential is a 'retractable penis' or a 'horse-penis'. The canon describes all Buddhas as having sexual organs in the shape of a male horse's sex organ hidden in their bodies. Some Mahayana texts argue that fretting over details such as the thirty-two marks leads one astray from the truth presented in the dharma<sup>4</sup>.

For the nuns at Zhi Guang Monastery, contradictory messages about women are part of life. They have inherited texts from many different Buddhist traditions and, although the temple emphasizes or minimizes different texts based on the tradition and preferences of its Master, the nuns cannot select one set of messages. Likewise, they are not free to reinterpret the textual meanings to suit their own ideas about the nature of women and their own beliefs about their relative spiritual potential. The texts studied and chanted at the temple, the examples of right and wrong action -- indeed all religious instructions -- contain contradictory messages about women that the nuns need to reconcile.

### **Women have bad karma**

In part, the contradictions in the texts read at the temple arise because they represent two different eras in Buddhism: first, the ancient, potentially more male biased Theravada tradition; and, second, the more recent, potentially more egalitarian, Mahayana tradition. While Mahayana Buddhism, the branch to which Zhi Guang monastery belongs, to many represents a step toward a belief in women's equal capacities, most Mahayana Buddhists still believe that it is better to be born a man and

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<sup>4</sup> It is this kind of emphasis that some contemporary Western feminist scholars place on these texts. Rita Gross half-jokingly proposes that a sheathed penis inside the body is a metaphor for female genitalia and that this mark requires that all Buddhas be women (Gross 1993:62-63).

that a woman of exceptional spiritual development would be expected to return as a man in her next lifetime. These beliefs are based on the notion that a woman can change into a man from one lifetime to the next due to her karma. One's karma produces one's gender, as Barnes explains:

Some treatises ...argue that when beings are born female, it is the result of past karma (actions in previous existences) which cause them to be reborn in an inferior position. Females are females because they have not advanced as far, spiritually, as males. Being born male is the visible demonstration of one's moral and spiritual superiority. A Buddha is the best, most perfect of human beings and has reached ultimate spiritual and moral perfection; naturally he has the appearance of a male: that is the karmic reward for his unexcelled attainment. His body is the epitome of male bodies, bearing all the physical marks (*lakṣana*) of manly perfection, the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of the mahapurusa, the Great Man (Barnes 1987:118).

As already discussed, one of the thirty-two marks is necessarily male. This mark, like one's incarnation as a male, is viewed as a reward for past actions. As one of the nuns I worked with at the temple, Venerable Chuan Zhang<sup>5</sup>, told me: 'if you have the body of a man, it's because you did better things in your past life. You have better karma.'

To be born as a woman is the result of poor behavior. A woman is reborn as a woman if she indulges in:

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<sup>5</sup> All field subjects' names are pseudonyms.

(1) Love for the body of a woman; (2) attachment to the passions of a woman; (3) constant delight in the beauties of a woman; (4) insincerity of heart to hide her wicked deeds; (5) weariness and contempt for her husband; (6) constant thoughts of other men; (7) ingratitude for the kindness of others; and (8) wicked adornment of her body for the sake of deception (Beyer 1974:53).

And men are reborn as women as a result of committing four types of wrongdoing:

(1) Disrespectfully laughing and shouting at the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas; (2) slandering one who is pure in keeping the precepts, saying he does not keep them; (3) flattering and fawning in order to deceive; and (4) envying the happiness of other men (ibid.).

Thus, through indulging one's faults one accrues bad karma and is reincarnated as a woman. For example, Venerable Chuan Du, a nun who held an important position at the temple, told me that she knew she had been a monk two lives ago, but was reborn as a woman in this lifetime because of the misdeeds she performed in the interim life.

In *The Sutra on Changing the Female Sex*, which the monastics at the temple study, a woman of learning asks the Buddha what women must do to be reincarnated as men. In addition to being obedient and pious, he stated that a woman must:

avoid envy, stinginess, flattery, anger, be truthful, slander no one, abandon desire, and all wrong views; revere Buddha and Dharma, make offerings to monks and to Brahmanas, give up attachment to home and family,



accept the precepts, have no evil thoughts, become indifferent to her female body, abide in the thoughts of enlightenment and the dharmas of the Great Man, regard worldly life as like an illusion, like a dream (Gross 1993:64).

The Buddha also outlined ten practices that a woman could undertake to overcome her faults and become a man. These steps are essentially the same steps that all Buddhists are supposed to practice to improve their karma and advance in their cultivation (Sunim 1999:134), although monastics believe women have more difficulty accomplishing them.

For a woman who has followed the above steps, *The Sutra on Changing the Female Sex* describes how her transformation to a man happens:

If women can accomplish [the profound state of mind which seeks enlightenment]...they will be freed of the female body and become sons...

Why? If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will have the great and good person's state of mind, a man's state of mind, a sage's state of mind...If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will not be bound to the limitation of a woman's state of mind.

Because they will not be limited, they will forever separate from the female sex and become sons (in Paul 1979: 175-6).

The nuns hope to come back as men in the next life because to do so is understood as the result of right action. It also means one's life will be easier.

## Women's hard lives

Woeful is woman's lot...

Woeful when sharing home with hostile wives,

Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain,

Some seeking death, or e'er they suffer twice,

Piercing the throat; the delicate poison take,

Woeful too when mother-murdering embryo

Comes not to birth, and both alike find death.

(Rhys-Davids and Norman 1989:67-8)

As the above excerpt from *Therigatha* verses 139-42 illustrates, Buddhist texts describe women's lives as being quite difficult. This section will describe how monastics relate the limits of women's spiritual potential to their difficult lives and how karma is believed to manifest in gender differences. *The Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*, which is widely read at the temple, explains the order of preferences for reincarnation. In this order, being born a woman is better than not being born human, but it is worse than being born disabled:

The Buddha said, 'It is difficult for one to leave the evil destinies and  
become a human being.

'Even if one does become a human being, it is still difficult to become a  
man rather than a woman.

'Even if one does become a man, it is still difficult to have the six sense  
organs complete and perfect.

‘Even if the six sense organs are complete and perfect, it is still difficult for one to be born in a central country [lit. China].

‘Even if one is born in a central country, it is still difficult to be born at a time when there is a Buddha in the world.

‘Even if one is born at a time when there is a Buddha in the world, it is still difficult to encounter the Way.

‘Even if one does encounter the Way, it is still difficult to bring forth faith.

‘Even if one brings forth faith, it is still difficult to resolve one’s mind on Bodhi.

‘Even if one resolve one’s mind on Bodhi, it is still difficult to be beyond cultivation and attainment (in Hua 1994:289).

This sentiment holds true for the nuns in this study. Venerable Chuan Chou, with whom I worked at Zhi Guang monastery’s reception office, told me regarding reincarnation that:

it’s not easy to become human beings. To become a man instead of a woman is already to have good fortune because his six senses will all be normal. You must have all six senses before you can become a monastic. To become a monastic means you have a lot of good karma. There is also a saying in one of the sutras: ‘Each is better than the last.’ Being a human being is not easy...As a person, being a woman is the worst, but being a normal woman is still better than being a cripple. Although we aren’t men, we can still study Buddhism and listen to the lectures of a great Master.

In this statement, Venerable Chuan Chou reverses the female/ 'cripple' order of preference, but the message is still clear: being a woman is not preferred.

A few nuns told me they had considered themselves feminists while they were still in college and had believed that men and women were the same. But after listening to the Master speak, they became convinced that women's lives were harder than men's. Given a choice, they said they would rather achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. However, should they be reincarnated, they would rather have the easy lives of men than come back as women. Venerable Chuan Xing told me that this association of women with negative karma is context specific. 'In Chinese culture women have been oppressed for many years. There's no way to change it...But for you in the West, the karma against women is not so severe...American women don't have the same karmic burden.' This nun was the only one I spoke with, however, who articulated to me the thought that women's bad karma might be context specific.

Of course, the assertion that women's lives are miserable is not unique to Buddhism, but in the Buddhist context, suffering takes on new meaning.

Hindu texts accord women religious status almost exclusively through their functions as mothers. But for the Mahayana Buddhist, motherhood represents pain, suffering, bondage, and dependency. The religious aim of Mahayana is to be liberated from these situations (Paul 1979:61).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Although the Buddha's foster mother, Gautama, is often used by scholars to illustrate women's achieving this liberation, in her book, *Charming Cadavers*, Liz Wilson shows how this renunciation may be seen as less a true renunciation than a maintenance of Hindu tradition which requires a widow to follow her husband's son at her husband's death.

At Zhi Guang, monastics repeatedly described women's lives as harder than men's. One monk, Venerable Chuan Ken, who worked in the construction office, told me that women suffer more on two levels:

Women originally suffer because of their bodies' structures. Their lives are harder because of this. For example, their monthly period is a hardship. Men don't have this problem; men are less likely to have physical problems... Women also have more emotional problems. For example, if a woman is married and has children, this is also a hardship.

The nuns told me that as women of the world (before they renounced it to become men) they would often bear the emotional burdens of others. While part of the bodhisattva vow is to feel compassion, the emotional burdens the nuns had before becoming nuns were described as having a different, hindering quality. A senior nun, Venerable Chuan Han, who ran a branch temple, told me:

I feel I've changed a lot; my heart is more open. Since becoming a nun, I feel happier toward others without expecting anything back. I feel I've grown a compassionate heart. Before becoming a nun, I had a boyfriend for over four years and I felt whatever he felt. If he was happy or sad I felt it and it was a huge burden... If you like someone... you live for him. And I think this is a kind of burden, a kind of suffering... A person can be good for you for a while, but then be bad for you.

The burdens of family life, burdens that this nun predicted she would have if she had not become a nun, are what other nuns sometimes have a hard time leaving behind. At Zhi Guang, many of the nuns bring their families with them. Of the eighteen female nuns who are still minors, the mothers of twelve of them are also nuns. Of the other six, all but one has an older immediate family member who is also a monastic. One nun, Venerable Chuan Miao, brought a daughter who did not want to become a nun. The daughter lives on the temple grounds, but not as a monastic. She still relies on her mother to be a mother to her at times, and this relationship is perceived by others at the temple, and by the nun/mother herself, as a hindrance. One nun, whose fifteen-year-old daughter/nun I befriended, brought her entire family to become monastics (including her four children, her siblings, her mother, some of her aunts) except for her husband (who volunteered at the temple but lives in the nearby city). Despite being a nun, she often has to fulfill the role of mother to her children. For example, she once approached me about teaching her daughter English (as had many parents when I lived in Taichung). As a monastic, she ideally should be free of such obligations, but as a mother, her duties are many and therefore her karmic burden is great. To the temple community, she remains a woman insofar as she still has these ties to the world. If she were free of them, she could be more of a man like the other nuns and monks at the temple.

Other nuns were able to leave their family roles behind, although leaving the emotional tie is more complicated. A nun I worked with at the reception office, the Venerable Chuan Zui, left a ten year-old daughter behind with her husband when she became a nun:

It took me more than two years to resolve to become a nun. It was not an easy decision to make because I had a family. When I came here my daughter was only eight years old. So I knew if I came here it would hurt her. Every time I thought about becoming a nun, I would think of her and cry. In the end it was my fate to come to Zhi Guang. There were many things pointing me here. I knew that if I couldn't become a nun and follow the Master it would be the most regrettable thing in my life. So I decided to give her up...I think people all have problems of love no matter what kind of love. I love her, and I also worried about her. We were knotted together and never would be untied since my feelings for her were very deep...When I first became a nun, I'd think of her and cry, but now that I've been here for two years, I never think about her. And I've decided not to call her anymore. I used to call her once every couple of months, to ask after her. But now, I haven't called her in 4-5 months because I think I'm not involved in her life at all, why should I bother her? She has her own life. She's already used to living with just her dad. If I call her again, won't that make her miss her mother and the way it was before? All it would do is hurt her, and I don't want that.

Although she and her husband were still married when she moved to Zhi Guang and was tonsured, he has recently asked for a divorce so that he can remarry and so that her daughter will have a mother-figure in her life. Divorcing him and ending contact with her daughter, she is reducing the ties that hinder her spiritual cultivation.

Her story also illustrates how difficult it is for a woman to leave behind family ties. Generally monastics think it is easier for men to leave behind their families. One such monk, Venerable Chuan Chung, had become involved in Buddhism through his wife's interest, and then his youngest son decided to become a monk at age thirteen. Despite his wife's greater interest in becoming a monastic, they decided that he should become a monk, and she should remain behind with their other son until he starts college – it was her duty as a mother. A father's ties are believed to be loose enough for spiritual pursuits.

The Zhi Guang community believes that women's attachments to their children are greater than men's and that this means that not only is it harder to decide to leave, but it also remains painful once at the temple. The Venerable Chuan Xi has a similar tale to that of Venerable Chuan Zui, but from the standpoint of a monk:

To become a monk was a very painful decision. You see I got along with my wife very well, and also the kid. But I thought that if I stay with them for this life, one day she or I will die, when I don't know. And then we will be born again in the wheel of birth and death. But if I got ordained, and if I was very diligent in my practice, then one day I will be enlightened, and then I can go back and help them enlighten themselves. That's the way of the Buddha, we enlighten ourselves and then those around us. So the question was whether I was looking for happiness in the short or long term. At the time I was 40 years old, and the practice of Buddhism takes decades, lifetimes, so I had to hurry...My wife, of course she didn't like it. But she knew it would be of no help if she forced me to



go back. Then she would be living with a person without a soul. But as for my daughter, I still feel bad about that...My mother told me that my daughter told another student that she doesn't have a father. When I heard that it was a great pain. But I still feel that my decision was wise; I'm sure.

Although Venerable Chuan Zui and Venerable Chuan Xi's stories are similar, Venerable Chuan Zui's attachment continued long after she became a monastic while Venerable Chuan Xi seems better able to console himself with the belief that the wisdom of his decision outweighs the pain he is causing his daughter.

The contrasts between Venerable Chuan Zui and Venerable Chuan Xi's stories illustrate several points made by scholars who have discussed textual treatment of women. Barnes argues that rather than revealing a hatred of women, early texts that speak of their limitations suggest instead a recognition of women's potentially greater connection to the world, illustrated best by their closer physical relationship (through pregnancy and breastfeeding) to their offspring than that of men to their children. Citing Falk (1974:77-79) and Paul (1979:5-6, 9-10), she asks whether 'on the basis of the relative scarcity of frankly antifeminine statements found in Buddhist texts, [it is right to conclude] that Buddhist ascetics were contemptuous of women?' She concludes instead that they believed because women produce and nurture life they are more deeply entangled in it (Barnes1987:113). This illustrates the larger point about women's spiritual abilities which Gross argues. Citing Horner and Yuichi, she asserts that examples traditionally taken to represent a misogynistic perspective, such as lists of

female woes (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy, having to leave one's natal family, etc.) suggest that women's lives are more difficult than men's rather than indicating a hatred of women or a belief that their spiritual impediments are inherent rather than derived from their environment and life circumstances (Gross 1993:43).

A similar lens could be turned on beliefs about the absence of women in the Pure Land. Although in many religions suffering is a sign of one's high level of spirituality, in Buddhism, it is a sign of attachment and bad karma. The particular types of suffering endured by women may be the reason there will be no women in the Pure Land:

O Bhagavan [lord], if after I have obtained Bodhi [enlightenment], women in immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable, incomparable, immense Buddha countries on all sides, after having heard my name, should allow carelessness to arise, should not turn their thoughts toward Bodhi, should, when they are free from birth, not despise their female nature; and if they, being born again should assume a second female nature, then may I not obtain the highest perfect knowledge (in Muller 1894:19).

This passage from the *Pure Land Sutra* has long been interpreted to mean that the Amitabha Buddha would not allow women into his Pure Land. One alternatively could understand the absence of women in the Pure Land as representative of the belief that no one will be born into a disadvantaged position in the Pure Land. Rather than improve the lives of women in this life, Buddhists strive to come back, and help others to come back, in an improved (i.e. male) body. Indeed, some scholars, most notably Barnes 1987 and Gross 1993, have argued that the Buddha wanted women to become men not because of

women's inferiority, but rather because of their disadvantaged position. In other words, women should become men not because women cannot attain enlightenment, but instead because their lives make it difficult for them to do so.

One could take the argument further and point out that for Buddhism social change is not the main issue. In the view of the monastics at Zhi Guang, if a woman is at a disadvantage because of her gender, why should she work to change the system into one that is more equitable when she could simply work to come back in the next life as a man (and encourage other women to do the same)? In the Buddhist cosmology, social inequalities, like physical inequalities, are natural. One is born in a disadvantageous body (whether physically disabled or female) as a result of karma accrued in a previous life. If men and women became socially equivalent, another manifestation of bad karma would arise to replace the devalued female category. In other words, bad karma will bear fruit in some other form. Although those with bad karma will be born in some disadvantaged condition, monastics at Zhi Guang emphasize that no disadvantage, whether a physical hardship such as blindness or a socially devalued position such as that of women, prevents one from becoming enlightened. Monastics argue that a blind man can become enlightened, but perhaps he would have more difficulty due to his physical predicament. Similarly, at Zhi Guang it is believed that a woman could attain enlightenment, but due to social and physical constraints it may be more difficult for her. To the monastics, it makes the most sense to work for good karma and achieve a better birth in the next life.

Despite having been born in a disadvantageous position emblematic of their poor karma, the nuns do not identify themselves as this type of women – one who is

constrained by a female's particular ties. Because they have rejected the world outside the temple, they no longer have such demands on them and do not identify with women's greater hindrances. Although they recognize that when they were 'in the world' they had more hindrances than men; to the extent that they have separated from the world, they see themselves as men.

**Women are *samsara***

'How are we to conduct ourselves, Lord, with regard to womankind?'

'As not seeing them, Ananda.'

'But if we should see them, what are we to do?'

'No talking, Ananda.'

'But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do?'

'Keep awake, Ananda.'

(in Carmody 1979:52)

At Zhi Guang, when the nuns identify themselves as women, they do so in a very limited sense. They acknowledge that because they have female bodies they threaten the spiritual development of men. Many texts, particularly the earliest Buddhist texts, discuss women not in terms of their relative spiritual potential but rather in terms of the threat their bodies pose to male cultivators. Most of the references to women in the early Buddhist canon describe them as objects of lust and as temptations that cause men to stray from the path of enlightenment. For a monk, the temptation of women is to be avoided whenever possible, as interaction with women can mean the difference between a life well lived and a life wasted. This belief that associating with women is fraught with

potential for problems can be seen in the following passage from *The Book of Gradual Sayings*:

Monks, there are these five disadvantages to a monk who visits families and lives in their company too much. What five? He often sees womenfolk; from seeing them, companionship comes; from companionship, intimacy; from intimacy, amorousness; when the heart is inflamed, this may be expected: Either joyless he will live the godly life, or he will commit some foul offense or he will give up the training and return to the lower life. Verily, monks, these are the five disadvantages (in Paul 1979: 52).

As Wilson notes, most references to women in texts do not debate their spiritual potential. Instead, they emphasize women's threat to men's spiritual cultivation (1996, passim). In doing so, Buddhist texts most often describe women as snares. Women either entice men passively (simply by being distracting), or purposefully and maliciously as indicated in the *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*:

Monks, I see no other single form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort...as a woman's form. Monks, whosoever clings to a woman's form—infatuated, greedy, fettered, enslaved, enthralled—for many a long day shall grieve, snared by the charms of a woman's form...Monks, a woman, even when going along, will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting or lying down,

laughing, talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of a man... Verily, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of [the Tempter,] Mara (in Sponberg 1992:20).

Women invariably lead to men's downfalls, and in the following passage, from *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, are linked not just to Mara, but also to destruction and ruin:

Women are ever the root of ruin, and the loss of substance; when men are to be controlled by women how can they gain happiness?... A woman is the destruction of destructions in this world and the next; hence one must ever avoid women if he desires happiness for himself (in Sponberg 1992 :19).

Monastics frequently referred to or paraphrased the above text, which was part of the curriculum at the Buddhist college at Zhi Guang, when explaining to me why the nuns lived separate from the monks and how they threaten men.

The writers of the early Buddhist canon used biographies of the Buddha as an example of how to overcome desires for women:

The young Siddhartha, on the point of leaving the palace for a wandering life fell asleep while beautiful dancing girls were performing for him.

When he woke, he saw them lying all around him asleep too—saliva trickled from their mouths; they were covered with sweat; some ground their teeth; some snored; the garments of some were in disarray, so that

they repulsively showed their private parts. This sight so filled Siddhartha with disgust that he likened the banquet hall to a charnal ground full of corpses (Bancroft 1987: 87).

The descriptions of women as sources of temptation may have been literary devices as well as having literal meaning. Women were often used to symbolize *samsara*. Paul sees the female equated with *samsara* most directly in the Theravada texts: ‘What was feminine or sensual was *samsara*, the world of bondage, suffering, and desire, which led to cycles of rebirths. This world of the feminine had to be vanquished at all costs’ (Paul 1979: 5)<sup>7</sup>. This portrait of women was perpetuated at the temple when the nuns described themselves as women and the ramifications of being women for their daily existence and they discussed themselves as representing *samsara* for the monks. Wilson has demonstrated how in traditional writings women also use their own bodies to this end and that both the monks and nuns meditate on the impermanence of female beauty, and never view male bodies as objects of a gaze (Wilson 1996:18, 105, 152-3).

Texts that factor in the nuns’ construction of a negative image of women mostly discuss women as sources of distraction or attachment for men and, therefore, as dangerous. At the temple, this belief that women are dangerous obtains in rules that keep nuns separate from monks. Women sit on different sides of the meditation hall and the dining hall so as not to distract the monks. When separate sides are not available, they sit behind the monks for the same reason. Venerable Chuan Zhi, who trained as a commercial artist before becoming a nun and now works in the dining hall, explained

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<sup>7</sup> However, Wilson argues against seeing too great a contrast between Theravadan and Mahayanan texts (Wilson 1996:189-93).

why the nuns and monks sit separately, ‘It’s about the rules. Buddha said that women have more trouble and bad karma. Females interrupt males’ cultivation. Therefore the female needs more rules to restrain her and to have respect for monks’ cultivation.’ One example of these kinds of rules is that when not wearing their *haiqing* (an outer garment), for instance when they are doing physical labor, men just wear their regular garments, but women have to wear aprons over theirs, ‘to keep our curves from showing and distracting the monks,’ Venerable Chuan Zhi told me.

The need to cover their bodies and shield monks from their physical form illustrates the way nuns receive messages from Buddhist texts that tell them that women are bad for men and that women are that which needs to be overcome (insofar as they are *samsara*). They represent all that is bad in the world and all that could entice a practitioner away from the path. Women need to be controlled for the sake of male cultivation. Such sentiments reflect the perceived need to prevent women from distracting men.

### **Women’s limitations**

Where the texts above describe women’s threat to men, other texts depict women as having limited spiritual capacity. Although the nuns see themselves as women insofar as they threaten the spiritual cultivation of men, they do not identify with descriptions of women’s spiritual limitations. These descriptions, the nuns say, do not apply to them because they are no longer ‘in the world’. They do not identify with the ‘girly’ woman described at the temple and in the texts as having flaws that hinder her spiritual cultivation. Texts and the temple community discuss women in terms of their relatively



limited potential to attain buddhahood. For example, the *Book of Gradual Sayings* includes:

In the morning a woman stays at home with heart haunted by the taint of stinginess. At noontide a woman stays at home with heart haunted by jealousy. At eventide she stays at home with heart haunted by sensuality and lust. These are the three qualities...possessed of which womenfolk...are reborn in Purgatory (in Paul 1979: 52-53).

In an interview, Venerable Chuan Shu, who worked as the Master's assistant and trained as a nurse before becoming a nun, reiterated this passage to me in her own words:

Women have three kinds of bad minds. As soon as they get up in the morning, they're greedy. That's the first point. They try to own all the things in the world. Second, they get jealous easily. And third is sexual desire or dependent minds. This means that women have a hunger for being protected or that women lust after handsome men more than men lust after women.

When women are described this way monastics often call them 'girly'.

The nuns at Zhi Guang learn and reiterate the textual message that women are flawed. The texts present women as having a closer attachment to *samsara*, and by the possession of many concomitant 'girly' qualities, as being hindered in their spiritual advancement. The textual passage above is just one of many examples of women failing to advance spiritually because of their negative qualities. In the *Nirvana Sutra*, Ananda

asks the Buddha why women never sit in court, embark on business, or reach the ‘essence of the deed.’ The Buddha replies: ‘Womenfolk are uncontrolled, Ananda. Womenfolk are envious, Ananda. Womenfolk are greedy, Ananda. Womenfolk are weak in wisdom, Ananda’ (in Harris 1999:50). There are myriad examples of such statements attributed to the Buddha as well in monk-authored, non-canonical literature.

These sentiments are often echoed at Zhi Guang. Monks and nuns frequently described women to me as weak, jealous, selfish, stingy, emotional, and vain. To act in a non-monastic manner is generally called acting ‘girly’. Anyone who is accused of acting compulsively, being prideful, or using poor judgment is told to stop acting like a girl. Stories told at the temple, such as the temple’s own *gong-an* (koans, zen riddles), repeat this theme of women who are not quite good enough. Stories including women usually involve them being distracted by details (such as counting how many prostrations they do each day, rather than concentrating on the acts themselves) or acting inappropriately (such as a nun being proud of how she no longer acts girly, only to be told by the Master that by being proud she *is* acting girly). In contrast, stories about men involve them being given very difficult tasks and managing to accomplish them, or being given difficult puzzles and finding truth through them. Thus women, or more specifically those who are ‘girly’, are set up as the models of how not to be. This emphasis on overcoming ‘girliness’ illustrates suggestions made by Humes (1996) and Paul (1979) that overcoming the female body through masculine rebirth (or a change of sex within one lifetime) is not the sole, or even primary, emphasis of the change of sex discourse. Instead the point is to overcome one’s ‘woman’s thoughts,’ one’s ‘woman’s nature and mental attitude’ and

replace it with a ‘male attitude,’ which means ‘being unattached to sexuality and responsible for one's actions’ (Humes 1996:134).

**Gender symbols: ‘samsara’ woman, ‘girly’ woman, *da zhangfu* man**

Two images of woman, woman as *samsara* (as a trap for men) and woman as ‘girly’ (possessing flaws preventing her from spiritual advancement) are kept discrete from one another in the nuns’ discourse. The nuns explain their need to follow additional rules to those followed by monks by explaining that they threaten monks’ spiritual progress. In these discussions, the nuns describe themselves as representing *samsara* for the monks. They do not conflate this symbol of woman as *samsara* with the characteristics of being a ‘girly’ woman. In other words, they can identify themselves as woman in the limited sense of having a female body and, therefore, being threatening to men in the way that all of *samsara* is dangerous for them. At the same time, they can, without contradiction, emphatically assert that they are not women because they do not possess the character of the ‘girly’ woman. The ‘girly’ woman is the antithesis of the ideal monastic. As Humes states, ‘women and femininity symbolize the world or worldliness,’ in other words they symbolize *samsara*. Yet the use of gendered categories is also illustrative of ‘ways of thinking, action, and modes of perception’ (Humes 1996:135). The concept ‘woman’ in this latter sense is not tied to one's body (as is the physically threatening *samsara* sense of woman) and, therefore, can be transcended as long as one has a ‘masculine attitude.’

In contrast to the ‘girly’ woman is the ideal monastic model of the *da zhangfu*. The term *da zhangfu*, literally, ‘big husband’, means ‘manly man’ or ‘heroic man.’ A *da*

*zhangfu* is someone who is fearless, decisive, calm, and compassionate. In short, he has all the qualities of a spiritually advanced person. Nuns use the term *da zhangfu* when referring not only to spiritually advanced monks, but also when they talk about themselves and about one another.

When the nuns defined *da zhangfu* in their conversations with me, they frequently contrasted the character of the *da zhangfu* with that of girls. They explicitly use the metaphor to show that they are not like girls (which others may mistakenly perceive them to be and which they had been before they left the world); they are instead strong and heroic. Venerable Chuan Hui, a nun and a college student at the temple's Buddhist institute, contrasts *da zhangfu* with someone who has negative 'girly' qualities:

In Buddhism when we say someone is a *da zhangfu* we mean he has qualities like decency and purity. He has a pure mind and he does good for others. He is not like a woman who only cares about beauty, her own children, about a small world. He is not like a girl who just talks to you, and chats about meaningless things...*Da zhangfu* is about qualities that are found on the inside, not the outside. It's about qualities such as not being afraid of the darkness, and not being the kind of person who's waiting for someone to save you, to give you happiness.

Using the metaphor *da zhangfu*, the nuns try to show others that they are not like 'girly' women who are weak and afraid; instead they are brave and fearless like *da zhangfu*. Venerable Chuan Ming, a nun who was also a student at the Buddhist institute, explains:

*Da zhangfu* are daring and resolved, not like women who are hesitant and stuff. *Da zhangfu* are open-minded, purposive... You know how indecisive girls are; a *da zhangfu* is much more decisive. Yes is yes, and no is no.... So that's what *da zhangfu* means.... Like girls take forever to decide and to think... We say that girls have more worldly thoughts. They like to make themselves pretty and they are narrow-minded... Women are more emotional and hesitant. Girls are more emotional; they get really angry and really happy.

A *da zhangfu* is by definition, then, not like girls. By drawing this contrast, the nuns argue that they are not like girls when they apply the term *da zhangfu* to themselves.

As *da zhangfu*, nuns are the same as men. According to the monk Venerable Chuan Xi, 'Generally speaking it's easier for a male to become a *da zhangfu*... but if a female can perceive the Buddha nature then she's equivalent to a male. She's a *da zhangfu*. She's even better than a male who cannot perceive the Buddha nature.'

The two categories--the negative 'girly' category, and the positive *da zhangfu* category—are posited against each other in much the same way that anthropologist James Fernandez describes the tropes of cow and rat being posited against each other when he says of the messages of Asturian metaphor 'A cow in short is everything a rat is not, and men are wise to draw the appropriate lessons that each nature has to teach' (Fernandez 1986: 5). The 'girly' woman teaches what one should not be and the *da zhangfu* man models what one should be.

Although many texts state that women embody all that is wrong in humanity, other texts studied at the temple include the sentiment that there is no such thing as gender, and, therefore, gender cannot interfere with women's progress. Another positive statement, made often at the temple, is that all beings, male and female alike, possess the Buddha-nature; therefore, all are capable of achieving enlightenment. Faced both with texts about flawed femaleness and those that acknowledge that all beings have the Buddha nature and gender divisions are illusions, nuns draw on a set of stories, such as that of the Naga princess from *The Lotus Sutra*, which suggest that spiritually advanced women can change their sex to overcome the apparent contradiction (Paul 1979: 166-216). These examples provide the nuns a context in which claiming to be men does not seem ridiculous or contradictory. If gender is an illusion, the nuns argue, then how could they be limited, and why must they be seen as women and having those flaws? They do not deny the fact of their physical bodies (and the threat their bodies pose for men), but they do not identify with the image of women presented at the temple as embodying all spiritual flaws. The nuns claim to be *da zhangfu* (and by applying the trope, argue with the metaphor that they are already men of that ilk) and draw on texts that allow for flexibility.

## **Conclusion**

In the temple's gender cosmology, metaphors of men and women are pitted against one another. Women, or more specifically, girls, are what one does not want to be and men, or more specifically *da zhangfu* (heroic, manly men) are what one does want to be. Nuns identify with the metaphor of the heroic man in their roles as cultivators on the

path to enlightenment and describe their former selves, or any traits they find to be flaws or hindrances, as being 'girly'. Without the freedom to select the texts that they like and dislike, the nuns use their transformation of sex to avoid any unseemly contradiction with the text. They can assert that women are indeed inferior to men, but then not identify with the category except to acknowledge that their bodies may be distracting for men. Reading the text from their new identities as men, they can reconcile their claims of equal abilities with texts that would deny them that possibility as women. With contextualized multiple gender identities they can see themselves as both men and as women without having to reconcile the contradictions in the texts.

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