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## Resistance through Transformation? The Meanings of Gender Reversals in a Taiwanese Buddhist Monastery

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## Chapter Nine

### *Resistance through Transformation?*

#### *The Meanings of Gender Reversals in a Taiwanese Buddhist Monastery*

By Hillary Crane

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.

— Venerable Master Chuan Ming

We nuns call one another *shixiong* (dharma brother) instead of *shijie* (dharma sister) to plant the seeds of males. This is both for the next life and as we live day to day because our environment is a reflection of our thought. If we use *shixiong*, we get rid of the female influence and of course the environment will change right at that moment, not just in the next life... We use the terms not just to remind us to become men in our next lives, but also in our next actions.

— Venerable Master Chuan Tong

As these quotes from Taiwanese Buddhist nuns illustrate, being a woman is something they think needs to be overcome. They believe that the difficulties associated with the lives of women and the qualities associated with women themselves—qualities the nuns believe they must overcome—make overcoming womanhood essential to achieving their spiritual goals. For these nuns, rejecting the category altogether in favor of identifying as a male is easier than trying to live a different, less burdensome life as a woman or trying to improve one's character traits as a woman.

This chapter demonstrates that the nuns resist the limitations of traditional Han gender ideologies by drawing on opportunities offered within those traditional gender constructions—opportunities that allow them to define themselves in opposition to the limited female gender characteristics and roles they reject. I argue that we should not interpret these nuns' masculine identification simply as

resisting dominant Han gender ideologies. Instead, the nuns embrace the traditional, sexist Han ideologies, even to the point of exaggeration—portraying women not only as dangerous to the spiritual cultivation of others, but also of limited spiritual ability. They identify the negative characteristics of women as stemming from the roles that they have within the family, and having freed themselves of these familial roles in order to become nuns, define themselves as quite different from women who exhibit these negative characteristics. As these nuns are informed by other aspects of traditional Han gender cosmology, particularly by their conceptualization of genders as correlative rather than binary, changing gender is relatively easy for them. In analyzing the nuns' statements about their gender change as well as their repeated references to religious, historical and mythical figures who change from women to men and serve as role models for the nuns, I will draw on the works of historians, philosophers, and anthropologists to show that in the correlative model, genders are fluid and defined by the embodiment of the yin and yang analogy. A female in a yang position becomes, for all intents and purposes, a man. In this way, the nuns are able to imagine themselves as men in every way that is spiritually important and reject the female constraints they perceive as hindering their religious progress. This correlative gender model provides the possibility for a woman to imagine herself to be a man, provided she adheres to certain rules and has certain statuses. In this model, gender is related (but not affixed) to the sex of one's body, and is more accurately thought of as a product of one's relationships than as a description of what one truly is.

The ethnographic data discussed in this paper were collected during fieldwork conducted in a large monastery and its affiliated organizations over the course of sixteen months. Ethnographic fieldwork for this study included co-residing with the monastics at the monastery, conducting participant observation and interviews, working alongside several monastics at the monastery's reception office, as well as attending various meditation retreats and classes at branch temples in and around the city of Taichung. Zhi Guang Shan, a pseudonym, is a Chan monastery in central Taiwan housing male and female adult monastics and also child monastics. At the time my field research was conducted, the monastery had approximately 1,000 tonsured monastics in the organization; approximately 300-500 were present at the monastery at any given time during the period of my research. The remainder of the monastery's monastics resided in smaller branch temples throughout the island, and some were attending school or on retreat in isolation. The majority, about three-quarters, of the monastics in the organization were female, as is common in co-ed Taiwanese monasteries in recent years.

## **Asserting Sexist Han Gender Ideologies**

Taiwanese Buddhist nuns outnumber Taiwanese Buddhist monks and hold posi-

tions of power and influence throughout the island. Some hold prestigious positions within large organizations and appear regularly in Taiwanese media. Some have founded their own organizations; Tzu Chi, the largest and arguably most influential Buddhist organization in Taiwan, was founded by a nun, the Ven. Master Cheng Yen. While such high profile and prestige might suggest that nuns are advocates for revising traditional Han stereotypes about women that hold women to be inferior in character and action, Taiwanese Buddhist nuns who I worked with instead asserted that women are inferior and that women, as women, have a harder time achieving spiritual goals than men do because of their roles in the family and their flawed characters. In making this assertion, they draw on traditional Han gender stereotypes that persist in Taiwan despite dramatic changes in the roles of women in the last century. Recent ethnographies of Taiwan show that despite dramatic changes in women's economic roles, little has changed in regards to the traditional ideological construction of gender. Gates describes her informants' conceptualizations of men and women:

Men strive for harmony, justice, and goodness, while women are 'narrow-hearted' in outlook, selfish, and mercenary. Men value the spiritual, women the material... Men are capable of higher virtues, finer feelings, closer friendships, and more filiality than women, but women corrupt them—partly through sexual enticement. Because of their 'better natures' men should hold positions of responsibility and authority in the family and the wider society, while women should accept their leadership and stay close to home (1987:145-147).

In her research among Taiwanese in the 1970s and 1980s, Gates found that traditional Han Chinese gender constructions pervaded contemporary Taiwanese ideas about gender. These ideas did not prevent some women from holding positions of power or acting in ways inconsistent with these beliefs, yet the beliefs persisted. Wolf found much the same:

Women were narrow-hearted. They were incapable of understanding the finer points of human relations on which all civilized life depended. They gossiped and were jealous and quarrelsome, scolding other members of the family and even the neighbors when aroused. They were dependent, timid, and prone to weeping. They were ignorant and stupid and irresponsible... Their sexuality could drain men of their strength or drive them insane with lust. According to some they were sexually insatiable; according to others, they were frigid. In elite families they were expected to (and sometimes did) defend their chastity from even a suspicion of stain, with their lives if necessary, but they were considered morally and physically weak (Wolf 1985:2).

In their collection of essays on women in Han Chinese society, Wolf and Witke similarly generalize about their collection with a statement that material on Han Chinese women produces “evidence for a Chinese conception of women as weak, timid, and sexually exploitable, *as well as* dangerous, powerful, and sexually insatiable” (1975:2), a statement that could easily apply to scholarship outside this volume as well. This traditional Han conception of women as inferior pervades temple discourse on gender in which women as women are never held up as role models and are rarely said to possess any worthwhile qualities.

When Taiwanese women become Buddhist nuns, they renounce the world and reject the lives they would have had<sup>1</sup>. They describe these lives, like the lives of their mothers and sisters, as excessively burdensome and full of emotional ties and commitments that are unfulfilling and hinder spiritual progress. These nuns believe that living the life of a woman ‘at home’ who hasn’t become a Buddhist nun leads to character traits that hinder spiritual progress. When they describe themselves as ‘men’, they do so in clear contrast to what they are not – a stereotype of women that exaggerates traditional Han gender ideology.

In the nuns’ discourse, women are generally described quite negatively and in opposition to the ideal traits of Buddhist monastics. When describing women’s characteristics, monastics at Zhi Guang repeatedly used the expression “narrow-hearted.”<sup>2</sup> For example, the Ven. Chuan Ting, who was in her forties and divorced before becoming interested in Buddhism said,

We want to be daring and decisive, not like women who are hesitant. We should be open-minded, purposeful... We don’t want to be all indecisive like girls are; ... girls take forever to decide and think... We say that girls have more worldly thoughts. They like to make themselves pretty and are narrow-hearted. Girls are more emotional; they get really angry and really happy. We want to get rid of these feminine characteristics.

In addition to “narrow-heartedness,” traditional Han female characteristics include indecision, emotionality, and vanity. These, as she says, must be overcome.

The monk Ven. Chuan Xi also described women’s “narrow-hearts”: “Generally speaking, women tend to be more jealous and envious. They’re not so open-minded; men’s hearts are bigger. But if a female can perceive the Buddha nature, then she’s equivalent to a male.” In this light, the narrow-heartedness of women seems to indicate that one fails to show compassion to those outside one’s immediate context, her family. Since a non-exclusive compassion is a key characteristic of a Bodhisattva, this failure is a hindrance to a woman’s spiritual pursuit.

Another characteristic associated with women by the monastics at the monastery was vanity. The nun who ran the reception office where I worked, Ven. Chuan Yun, told me of how her family had appealed to her vanity as an attempt

to prevent her from becoming a nun. They had taken her out and had her makeup professionally done, they bought her new clothes and jewelry, and then they had her picture professionally taken. They thought this would persuade her not to go into the temple. Ven. Chuan Yun and her assistant Isabella, who, independent of each other, both wanted to show me pictures of what they looked like before becoming nuns, made me swear not to tell anyone else about the pictures—they were afraid they would be ridiculed for acting vain. I was criticized once for vanity as well. When I got to work one morning with my hair down (instead of tied back as I usually wore it), Ven. Chuan Hu, who gave visitors tours of the temple, looked horrified and asked what had happened to my hair. She said that I should cut it short. I told her that the teenage nuns (who had stopped by my room one evening as a group when my hair was down) had liked it and told me to wear it that way more often. She disparaged them and said, “what do they know; they still like to play with Barbie dolls.”

Ridicule and criticism are not the only way that Buddhist nuns learn not to be vain. Another nun told me how she used to like to fuss with her hair and makeup, but after becoming a nun, she stopped. “The Buddha tells us that the body is dirty and dirty things come out of it. Since I found out the truth, I no longer care about my looks.”

Women’s characteristics are regularly contrasted with the good qualities of Buddhist monastics. According to one nun I interviewed,

A Buddhist monastic has qualities like decency, purity; he has a pure mind and does good for others. He’s not like a woman who only cares about beauty, her own children, about a small world. A monastic is not like a girl who just talks at you, and chats about meaningless things.

In addition to the characteristics illustrated in the preceding quotes, nuns often describe women as “slow,” “ungenerous,” “fragile,” “soft,” “tender,” and “emotional.” One well-educated nun, Ven. Chuan Ming, also described herself before becoming a nun—and the other women in her family—as emotional:

In my family all the women always feel agitated. Such as 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 or 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, will cry and feel sad, but not men. Most are steady in their emotions and they won’t argue about many things, but girls aren’t the same.

Ven. Chuan Ting echoed this statement, saying, “Women are more emotional and sensitive. They think differently from men.” Emotionality is a quality linked closely to women, and is also regularly highlighted as a quality that distracts spiritual cultivators from their path.

In addition to allowing emotions to distract women from their spiritual pursuits, a lack of focus is seen as preventing one from concentrating on spiritual goals, and is a problem associated with women. 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.” In contrast with men, then, women are seen as being burdened by their indecision.

At the temple, women are also thought of as petty and jealous. According to the senior nun Ven. Chuan Han, who became a nun ten years prior to my interviewing her and ran one of the meditation centers:

If we feel like women inside, we’ll be like girls. If we have this idea, we’ll be a lot like girls and think “I need to be pretty,” “I need to be shy.” After we become nuns, we study men’s styles. For example, we don’t want to gossip like women do. We also don’t want to have women’s personality traits—women get jealous easily, say bad things and scold people. After we become nuns, we change to be like men.

Nuns view these qualities as problematic; they stem from women feeling like women and are, according to Ven. Chuan Han, surmountable by studying the ways of men and becoming like men on the inside. According to the monk Ven. Chuan Chung, with whom I worked at the reception office, the nuns seek to become like men on the inside; they no longer wish to be like women outside the temple who “will *tuotulala* [delay, postpone, or avoid] and be *niuniunienie*<sup>3</sup> [bashful, reluctant]. It’s the habit of some women and it can be a bad habit.” Once they move into the temple, they begin to study the ways of men and break these characteristics.

Furthermore, the monastic community at Zhi Guang often described women as “good at details, but not at understanding.” One of the projects I was involved in at the temple was to translate 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. Those stories dealing with men all involved them being given a task to undertake, accomplishing that task, and learning from it.

Two of the nuns I interviewed, however, did defend women. When asked why she thought more women than men were becoming monastics, one said, “I think women have kinder hearts.” Another put a different spin on statements

made at the temple, arguing that they reflect traditional Han cultural biases against women and contradict Buddhist ideology:

This is our cultural problem: men and women aren't equal. However, in Buddhism there is no hierarchy. Women have to study men's ways, but the goal is the middle. It's not because women are bad. We speak of these things in terms of males and females because in Chinese culture that's how they are understood and we want people to understand us. But at its base, Buddhism is not like this. There is no difference between men and women. They aren't divided; they're equal.<sup>4</sup>

These two nuns' statements were rare, however, and the dominant description of women is not so accommodating of potential strengths or variability among women. The dominant perspective can perhaps best be summed up by Ven. Chuan Du, "The Buddha wants us to be rid of our femininity—not to turn into something, but to be rid of something that's bad."

Some Taiwanese women look at the hard lives their mothers have had and see becoming a nun as the only worthwhile alternative. Ven. Chuan Yun, a former music teacher, explained that she thought more women were becoming nuns because women now have more options available to them.

Before, men were dominant in society. Women were like by-products, in all areas, from knowledge to education. Now males and females have equal opportunities for education and knowledge. Women's minds have been opened. Hence, they can get more chances to choose what their lives should be. Today, there are more opportunities...but none put you at ease except learning the dharma.

When I asked Isabella about marriage the day before she was tonsured she said simply: "being married is tiring."

In one particularly interesting moment during my fieldwork, a nun leading a group of lay people through their first night of meditation class highlighted the burden of marriage and family life for women in a revealing way. During the question and answer session at the end of instruction, one student asked why all of the nuns call one another *shixiong* (师兄 dharma brother) not *shijie* (师姐 dharma sister). This nun answered that the term *shixiong* was used to encourage women to have minds like those of men, whose roles within the family don't carry the same burdens women's roles do. To illustrate this, she asked everyone in the class of about one hundred to raise their hands. After virtually everyone had, she asked those who didn't know their children's birthdays to lower their hands. All of the men lowered their hands and all of the women's hands remained in the air. After everyone looked around and laughed, she said that women carry these additional burdens because of their role in the family, and that women would be better off if freed of these burdens and able to concentrate on spiritual pursuits the way that men are.

Many of the preceding quotes express the belief the nuns share that by studying the characteristics and behaviors of men, they can overcome the negative characteristics of their previous genders; the next section will demonstrate that they follow models of other women who have left their families, and have been described as masculine and as having the positive qualities associated with Buddhist monastics when they themselves leave the family and adopt those characteristics.

### “The Mulan Complex”

When asked directly about the apparent contradiction of their masculine identities and female bodies, nuns at Zhi Guang regularly cited stories of other women in both Buddhist texts and Chinese history who transformed into men. In Buddhist texts, these women include the Naga Princess from the *Lotus Sutra* among others who challenge the right-mindedness of monks who say their spiritual abilities must be limited because they are women.<sup>5</sup> The figures in these stories have moved into the world where they are free to redefine themselves and in the process do so as men and are therefore unlike the women the nuns describe as having problematic character traits who remain “at home.” Moreover, as a closer look at some of the nuns’ language suggests, it is in some respects the familial context itself that gives the women who remain at home these characteristics. The nuns typically describe themselves as free of these worldly contexts and their accompanying negative character traits. While the nuns frequently cite stories of women from Buddhist texts who become men due to their high spiritual achievement in order to describe how they themselves are free of female burdens, they also compare their act of leaving home to become a nun with the decision of Mulan to leave home to serve in the military. In so doing, they join a long line of women who have similarly “left home” and been accepted in traditionally male roles. When nuns draw on this example, they join a long tradition in Han culture, history, and myth of women who overcome their gender by becoming its opposite—they become women warriors, defined contextually as male. Because their gender is constructed by their behavior and their relationships, and is not thought of as a product of their bodies, these women have the flexibility to change their gender identities through their actions.

The example most regularly referenced by the nuns when describing their own gender identification is that of Mulan (also known as Hua Mulan or Fa Mulan). The nuns often cite this example when drawing a comparison between their own heroic act of deciding to *chu jia* (出家 leave home) and become a monastic with Mulan’s heroic act of leaving home to fight on behalf of her father. An early collection of biographies includes the following entry for her: “Mulan ancient days filial daughter, donned man’s dress. As substitute for father joined army on frontier for ten and two years. Then returned home. People, none knew her as a woman” (in Ayscough 1937:214). Mulan probably lived during the Wei

dynasty (386-557 CE). Although it varies in different translations and versions, the basic outline of her story is the same: that she left home dressed as a man, and fought in the army for twelve years as a substitute for her father, who was ill, and for her brother who was too young to fight. Throughout the 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 in to her woman's clothing, returning to her role as daughter and eventually wife. According to most versions of the story, 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 there was no heroic or virtuous option available to her, only the role of daughter or of sister. She retained her female virtue by remaining chaste, but she was only able to achieve the feats that made her famous by becoming a man.

Taiwanese Buddhist nuns are not alone in comparing their actions to those of Mulan. In her 1970 dissertation, historian Roxanne Witke identified what she called a “Mu-lan complex”—a recurring theme in Han 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 (Witke 1970). This gender reversal manifests in several figures in Han Chinese culture, including the women generals of the Yang family, Qin Liuyu, Liang Hongyu, and Xun Guan. Latter-day women such as Qiu Jin also invoked this archetype and identified with this hero image, and it persists in the popular *gongfu* movies and historical television dramas in Taiwan today. Although women have assumed these roles, to do so they have needed to stop being women and become men. This requires leaving their familial contexts that define them as women. Their cultural context allows them to think of themselves as men; they are accepted in this role.

For both these notable historical figures and for the nuns in this study, the appeal of the hero motif partially lies 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 of this study, who are striving to overcome their female qualities, the appeal may lie in the example set in the hero motif's representation of limitations overcome.

## Correlative Gender Model

Although the nuns assert a traditional Han gender ideology in which women are said to have negative characteristics, they don't identify with these characteristics or with the category “woman.” Instead, they identify with men and with women who've similarly left behind their familial roles. These women's reversals draw on a particular construction of gender, the correlative gender model,

which has been discussed by scholars in various disciplines. This construction 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, and is defined primarily through the family. According to historian Tani Barlow (1994:254), prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese had no inclusive concept of 'woman', only relationship-dependent terms such as mother and daughter. Indeed, it could be argued that in Qing China, and in fact more recently, women didn't exist outside the family. Rubie Watson's work on naming in Han Chinese society illustrates this point. Watson contrasts the many names given to men, and their corresponding well-developed individuation, with the lack of names given to women and their lack of individuation:

Peasant women...experience few publicly validated life changes, and those that they do undergo link them ever more securely to stereotyped roles. Women's naming leaves little room for individuation or self-expression. Unlike males, whose changes are marked by both ascribed (for example, elderhood) *and* achieved criteria (such as student, scholar, businessman, writer, politician), a woman's changes (from unmarried virgin to married woman, from nonmother to mother, from reproducer to nonreproducer) are not related to achievement outside the home. Instead of acquiring a new name at marriage or the birth of a first child, women's changes are marked by kin terminology or category shifts. At marriage the bride loses her *ming* [name] and becomes known by a series of kin terms. At the birth of a child she may add a tekronym ("Sing's mother"), and as she approaches and enters old age more and more people will address her simply as "old woman" (*ah po*) (1986:627).

Women are defined primarily, if not exclusively, by their relationship to their kin, their relationship to men (as daughter or wife), or their role in childbearing and rearing.

Barlow argues that contemporary terms that translate as 'women', particularly the terms *nüxing* (女性) and *funü* (妇女), 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'" (Barlow 1994: 256, citing Cowie). 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 (Barlow 1994: 257).

Thus, a female who was not acting in a relationship-dependent role (as a wife, etc.) was not part of an inclusive, independent category of “woman.” The implication of Barlow’s claim is that any person not defined as mother, etc. in a familial role, was by default a man.<sup>6</sup>

While it may seem far-fetched to suggest that a female outside the family context was not understood to be a female at all, there is much evidence to support this implication of Barlow’s claim. 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 falls into the classification of *zhangfu*, literally, husband or man. Historian Joanna Handlin describes the 16<sup>th</sup> century writer Lu Kun, who wrote a book about women of virtue which frequently compared virtuous women with men:

Frequently Lu enhances a heroine’s virtue by declaring that even men would have found her dilemma difficult. Thus throughout his commentary run such declarations as: “The two words loyalty and purity are difficult for a gentleman; how much more so for a servant woman!” “How are there in the world people who do not fear tigers? How much more so of a timid girl!” Hsiao-o’s “wisdom and bravery are such that there are some brave fellows who cannot match her,” and “This is a matter for a great fellow. Now, that a woman can do it, alas! How heroic!” (Handlin 1975: 23).

More telling is the following: “Indeed Lu K’un [Kun] often unwittingly refers to his heroines as “fellows” (*chang-fu*) [*zhangfu*], counting them among the ranks of men” (Handlin 1975:23). His use of the masculine term suggests that associating those behaviors and traits attributed to men with women actually transforms women into men.

Although in a very different time and place, the nuns in my study appear to draw on these historical models and themes in their own discussion of remarkable women who they labeled as men. Ven. Chuan Wu, who worked with me at the monastery’s reception office and gave tours of the grounds, regularly articulated this concept, saying once: “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.” Similar sentiments are regularly articulated when explaining the use of *shixiong* (dharma brother) and not *shijie* within the organization. Use of *shixiong* when referring to monastics, regardless of gender, is said to plant the seed of masculine thought and action and to discourage nuns from thinking of themselves as women.

Both in the historical texts and in temple discourse, women are not perceived by their culture as women while they are performing heroic feats, and the idea of ‘woman’ does not need to change to accommodate brave and heroic acts

by women. Instead these women are called *zhangfu* (fellows), and thereby reinforce existing divisions of gender by character traits, behavior, and action, rather than bodies. The term *zhangfu* was used widely at the temple when nuns described how they were heroic like Mulan, who like them was a *da zhangfu*, a heroic man. A woman who acts like a man does not expand the idea of what a woman can be, but is rather reclassified to suit her new behavior as a man.

The idea that Han gender cosmology allows for identification primarily on one's role rather than one's essence is not new. In his analysis of Han Chinese kinship, anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu suggests that because Han Chinese culture has generally constructed genders on specific roles, such as those achieved through marriage (rather than generalized as they are in the West), Han Chinese men are better able to treat a woman as her competence warrants once she has attained a position of prestige (Hsu 1968:592-594). This is not to suggest it is easy for women to attain such positions; it is actually quite difficult. Once they do, however, they are generally accorded the respect due to someone in that office. He contrasts this with American culture of the 1960s (and earlier) which was not able to separate a professional woman from her gender; she was always marked with it, for instance being referred to as a 'lady doctor' rather than just 'doctor'. Although traditionally the options available to women *as women* were quite limited, exceptional women could leave these roles and take on male roles and male characteristics. Once they had done so, they were referred to as 'fellows', or *zhangfu*, and accorded status as men.

The statements of monastics in this study reflect this viewpoint. A monk who studied engineering and worked in the construction office said, "After cultivating a long time, women correct their female habits. They appear more like males...Nuns who have cultivated for a long time will look like men." Having moved beyond the context in which they have female roles and the negative characteristics that flow from these roles, monastics argue, nuns are able to have characteristics and habits that are in accord with their new role as monastics.

The nuns in this study draw on a particular flexibility allowed by the correlative gender model when they assert that they are men. Barlow clarifies how this flexibility of gender categories happens—one can change genders because genders are less affixed to sex in the Han context than might be assumed. Again discussing the work of Chen Hongmou, Barlow explains:

[G]endering in Chen Hongmou's world proceeded as a cosmological activity whereby differential relations on the analogy of yin/yang established and positioned subjects normatively on the primary sites of the *jia* [family], in constantly reinscribed taxonomies that included protocols of (gender and positionally appropriate) behavior. Chen Hongmou's texts do not refer to women's bodies. They do not designate as women those persons whose bodies exhibit specific markings, like bound feet or large breasts....Other contemporary texts also seem relatively uninterested in conflating gender and body...Chen Hongmou's texts do not refer to women's bodies or designate as women those whose bodies exhibit specific markings, and since other contemporary texts also tend not to conflate gender with body (Barlow

1994: 257-8).

Therefore, in some historical and anthropological literature examining Han culture, gender does not appear to 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 suggests:

[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” (Barlow 1994: 259, quoting Lauretis and Foucault).

With gender not based on sex, the question becomes: where do gender categories come from? Barlow suggests that the yin and yang analogy that is based on the relationship between the two categories can shed some light on a possible answer.

What appear as “gender” are yin/yang differentiated positions: not two anatomical “sexes,” but a profusion of relational, bound, unequal dyads, each signifying difference and positioning difference and analogically (Barlow 1994:263).

Or, as historian of Chinese medicine Charlotte Furth states: “In Chinese cosmology yin and yang were not attributes of sexed bodies but themselves the foundation of gendered meanings diffused in bodies and the world at large” (1999:301-2). These relationships are founded on the principles of yin and yang, although not in a straightforward fashion. Yin and yang do not produce men and women, but instead produce forces in relation to one another such as husband and wife, or sister and brother (Barlow 1994: 258-259). Having left the family on becoming monastics, nuns are no longer in relationships in which they can embody a yin force in relationship to others.

As manifest in the nuns' descriptions of their lives before becoming nuns, the relationship constituted in this analogy of yin and yang is quite different from a binary, dualistic conceptualization of the relationship between the gender categories. In their 2000 essay, historians of Han Chinese philosophy Hall and Ames describe a correlative understanding of Han Chinese notions of gender as a means to explicate the different nuances of sexism in Han Chinese culture from that found in the West. “[To understand Chinese sexism as different from the West], we will have to employ the language of interdependence rather than

independence, of complementarity rather than autonomy, or process rather than of substance” (Hall and Ames 2000:84). The core of their argument can be seen in the following passage:

In the correlative understanding, gender is more fluid and lacks exclusivity . . . [C]orrelativity more easily promotes the redefinition of roles and gender characteristics than does the dualistic model . . . [In the correlative model] neither human nature nor gender is given. A person is not born a woman, but becomes one in practice. And gender identity is ultimately not one of kind, but resemblance. The sexist problem, then, will be one of degrees of disparity rather than strict inequality. Males and females are created as a function of *difference in emphasis* rather than *difference in kind* (Hall and Ames 2000:88, emphasis in original).

The fluid and non-exclusive correlative model involves permeable boundaries between the genders, and flexible definitions of who fills what role. According to Furth, “the boundaries of gender constructed in bodily accounts of yin and yang...were flexible and shifting ones, sharing in the emphasis on transmutation and change characteristic of the underlying cosmology of yin yang...” (1999:305). Removing gender from sex means that bodies are no longer deterministic of gender—instead, gender is enacted in one’s role, one’s relationships and one’s behavior; a woman is only a woman if she is fulfilling a woman’s role in relation to a man. Genders are different from one another in emphasis rather than in kind. Having removed themselves from contexts in which they can be so defined, women who have left home, as have Buddhist nuns, can be seen as something other than women.

While the traditional Han gender cosmology drawn on at Zhi Guang monastery reaffirms negative stereotypes for women, it also creates an alternative through the correlative gender model. While women’s roles produce character traits that are not only stereotypically negative but are believed to interfere with spiritual goals, women *do* have the option of not having these roles. They can leave the family in which these roles confine them and instead become nuns, free from the female roles and the negative character traits they develop in the family structure. They can become monastics and draw on the Mulan model of a woman who moves outside the family and is accepted by her peers as a fellow. Having moved outside the family, these nuns see themselves as having undertaken heroic acts not possible for those of their previous genders, narrowly defined. They’ve become men in their roles as monastics, and in the process of living their new roles, shed the negative character traits and behaviors of women in favor of the masculine characteristics and behaviors expected of Buddhist monastics.

## Conclusion

Removing gender from sex means that for the nuns, bodies are not deterministic of gender—instead, gender is enacted through their roles, their relationships, and their behaviors. If a woman is only a woman if she is fulfilling a woman's role in relation to a family, then a nun, who has renounced her ties to the family by entering the monastery, is no longer a woman. Based on the correlative model, as in the historical accounts above, gender is fluid and malleable for the nuns at Zhi Guang. Thus, when the nuns say they are men, they mean to be disassociated from not only their previous roles in the family, but also their gender defined by it and the characteristics that stem from being in those roles.

While Taiwanese Buddhist nuns perpetuate and exaggerate negative stereotypes about women, they don't see the roles and characteristics of women as fixed and unchangeable, with rare exceptions. Although they aren't advocating for change in the way that women are viewed or the roles women fulfill within the family, they do suggest that there is a potential for change—women have the option to not enact these traditional roles and to shed negative characteristics. They can draw on the model of Mulan and the opportunities afforded by the correlative gender model and identify themselves as men. Rather than directly resisting the dominant Han gender ideology, they can draw on the options available within the model to transform their genders. As men, they are free to define themselves in opposition to the stereotypes of women that they reaffirm.

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## Notes

1. I have argued elsewhere the degree to which the nuns choose this life as a form of marriage resistance and attempt to avoid living lives like the women they know who balance difficult work and family lives, and who, the nuns assert, are unhappy and unfulfilled in those roles (Crane, 2004).

2. Translating the term *xin* is difficult. Sometimes it is translated as "heart"; sometimes as "mind." I have translated this phrase as 'narrow-hearted', because I don't believe the monastics are intending to say 'narrow-minded'. This expression is juxtaposed with having compassion rather than with having an open-mind.

3. This particular monk spoke excellent English, having lived in the United States for over 10 years as a businessman. However, he used the Chinese expressions here, and so I have left them in Chinese as the English does not convey the sense of the repeated syllables in Chinese.

4. This both is, and isn't, technically true. I have argued elsewhere that reconciling the mixed messages of Buddhism is one of the nuns' motivations for a self-conception as male (Crane 2007).

5. I have examined these examples along with spiritual motivations for gender reversals in Crane, 2007, p. 141. For a more detailed discussion, see Paul, 1979, pp. 166e216).

6. While Barlow doesn't discuss the possibility that men are in some similar way defined through the family, in traditional Han society a man is arguably similarly defined by his patrilineal kinship as manifested in his family name and his lineage. His status as an adult is also defined by whether he is married and whether he has sons. According to Confucius, the worst unfilial (for a man) is without offspring (sons). See the chapter by Shi in this volume for an example of the problems encountered by unmarried men in contemporary rural northeast China.