

Wendi Leigh Adamek

A NICHE OF THEIR
OWN: THE POWER OF
CONVENTION IN TWO
INSCRIPTIONS FOR
MEDIEVAL CHINESE
BUDDHIST NUNS

This article is a preliminary exploration of a unique collection of seventh-century memorial niches for Chinese Buddhist nuns and its implications for the fields of Chinese Buddhism and gender studies. The niches are sculpted in the cliffs and rocks of Lanfeng shan 嵐峰山 (Misty Peak Mountain), which faces Bao shan 寶山 (Treasure Mountain) across a broad valley. The site is collectively known as Bao shan and is situated near Anyang in Henan Province.¹ While we have other evidence of the activities of Tang dynasty (618–905) nuns as donors and devotees at prominent sites such as Longmen and Dunhuang, this little-known site is a rare window into the lives of individual Tang nuns within the context of a particular practice community.

Here, I focus on the difficulties involved in discerning individuality and active challenges to the status quo in medieval Buddhist materials, engaging Bernard Faure's work on gender in East Asian Buddhism. Debates over female agency in East Asia have generated a subfield at the intersection of cultural and historical studies, sociology, literary criticism, and material culture, especially for later periods. I am currently working on

I would like to express my deepest thanks for the efforts of the *History of Religions* editors and the careful reading and insightful comments of the anonymous reviewer.

¹ I use "Lanfeng shan" when I am referring to the location of the nuns' niches, and "Bao shan" when I am referring to the site as a whole.

a monograph on the Bao shan site in which the role of nuns in Chinese Buddhism is considered within these larger contexts. By taking up issues raised in Faure's works, primarily *The Red Thread* and *The Power of Denial*, I do not mean to imply that his is the only significant voice on these matters. However, his works remain key reference points at the intersection of gender studies and the study of medieval Buddhism and invite critical engagement.

It is no accident that much of our information on the activities of Tang Buddhist women comes from the archaeological record. The Buddhist notion of "gaining merit" authorized Buddhist women to use their own resources to dedicate images and to copy scriptures but not to compile their own works. The sole medieval Chinese Buddhist record of the lives of nuns was compiled by a monk, and there is no contemporaneous Tang hagiographic collection for nuns. While there are approximately a hundred Tang era memorials dedicated to or referencing nuns, there is no other site-specific collection that includes detailed representations of those commemorated.² Moreover, the scale of the nuns' communal investment in reshaping the landscape at Lanfeng shan, creating a space where individual nuns are visually represented as serious Buddhist practitioners, appears to be unrivaled in the Chinese archaeological record.

While there is growing interest in the Bao shan site, this article is the first attempt to introduce the scholarly world to the significance for gender studies of this singular record of the collective and individual aims of a community of medieval Chinese Buddhist nuns. As there are relatively few accounts of the aspirations of medieval religious women in Asian contexts, Lanfeng shan at Bao shan should be recognized as an important world heritage site; I might add that Lanfeng shan is currently unprotected and has been subject to depredations. In this introduction to the site, I stress the importance of the nuns' use of various preestablished iconographic, literary, and funerary practices to create a unique bricolage dedicated to perpetuating the reputations of women who devoted their lives to Buddhist practice. One can trace the histories of various elements, but the resultant densely packed network of representations was unprecedented and appears not to have been replicated at other sites.

Here, I introduce two of the longest memorials for individual nuns and discuss the relative weight given to different aspects of practice in each memorial. The memorials were created within various social and soteriological contexts, and the literary conventions that shaped them unquestion-

² See Li Yuzhen 李玉珍, *Tangdai de biqiuni* 唐代的比丘尼 [Nuns of the Tang dynasty] (Taibei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1989); Valentina Georgieva, "Buddhist Nuns in China: From the Six Dynasties to the Tang" (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2000).

ably mirror rather than challenge the status quo. However, according to normative Chinese memorial practices, memorials for women presented their lives solely in the context of their roles as wives and mothers. And in the Buddhist sphere, the normative memorial for an adept would be that of a monk. Thus, the fact that the resources of two main convents and numerous female disciples were expended to create a memorial grove of monuments dedicated to nuns is a significant development.

Visually, the memorial niches are quite stunning (see fig. 1). The inscriptions are carved beside ornate sculpted stūpa-shaped niches that originally held, and in some cases still hold, exquisite carved “portrait” statues of the subjects. The stūpa-niches show stylistic continuity with carvings of Buddha-niches at the nearby Northern Qi 北齊 (550–77) site known as Xiangtang shan 響堂山.³ The portrait-images of nuns appear to be unique; they are both earlier and iconographically distinct from the Longmen donor-images of nuns discussed by Amy McNair.⁴ The inscriptions themselves are shaped by the conventions of both Chinese lithographic memorialization and Buddhist donor inscriptions on stelae and carved devotional niches. As Dorothy Wong has shown, the blending of Buddhist devotional icons, epigraphic forms, and classic Chinese stone-carving techniques inspired sculptors to new heights of artistry in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁵

I first introduce the background of the site and briefly discuss the history of nuns in Buddhism, referring both to Indian and to Chinese examples. In the section entitled “Family Ties,” I discuss the connections between a nun’s natal identity and her Buddhist identity. The main section of the article, in two parts, is devoted to discussions of the memorial inscriptions (for which I offer full translations) for the nuns Sengshun and Puxiang, respectively. In my discussion of Sengshun’s inscription, I examine practice specializations available to nuns under the heuristic rubrics of “Dharma” (the study and teaching of Buddhist doctrine), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *dhūtāṅga* (extreme asceticism), and I explore the heightened significance of this third category in women’s practice. Turning to Puxiang’s inscription, I focus on a reference to the subject’s enlightenment and discuss connections between intimacy and community in conveying spiritual experience.

³ See Katherine Tsiang-Mino, “Bodies of Buddhas and Princes at the Xiangtangshan Caves: Image, Text, and Stūpa Buddhist Art of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550–577)” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1996).

⁴ On the Longmen nun donors, see Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 132–35. I discuss the nuns’ portrait-statues in a forthcoming article.

⁵ Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004).

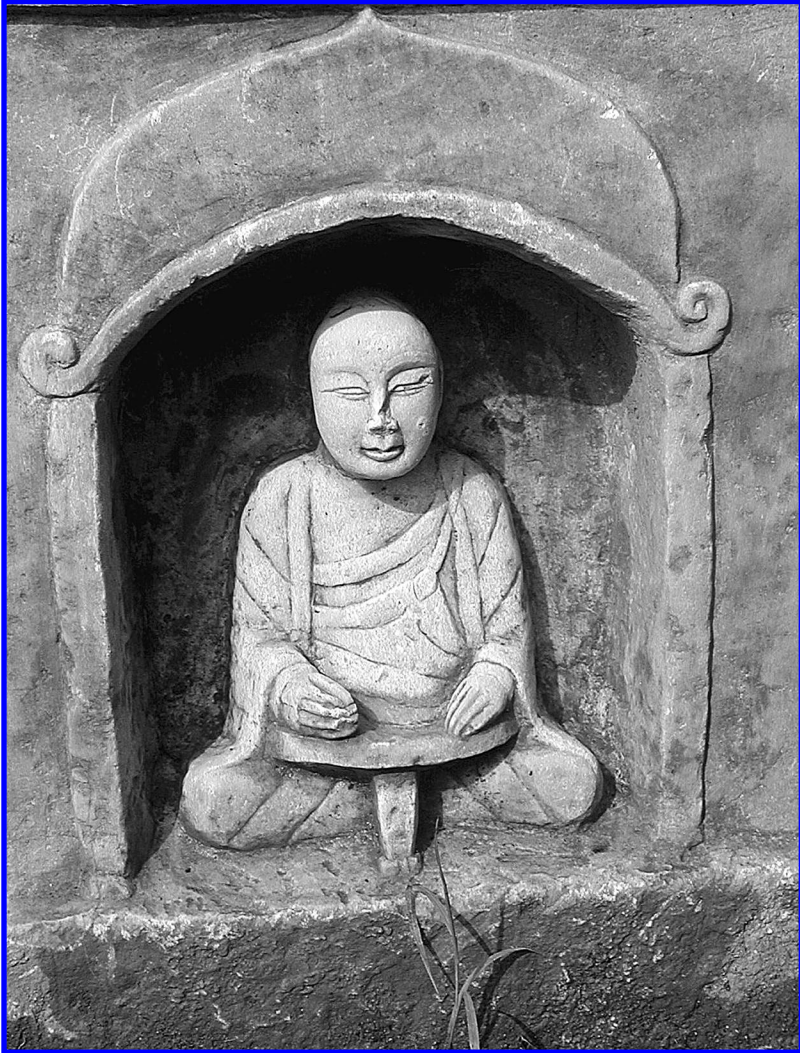


FIG. 1.—Lanfeng shan no. 34A: Faguang 法光, nun. Dedicated in 658. The object in the lap of the image is a portable writing table. Photo credit: Frederick M. Smith.

In the final section, “Active Voices,” I turn to work by Faure and others on the question of female agency. In *The Red Thread*, Faure points out that even when we are presented with Buddhist material that is ostensibly from a feminine perspective we cannot project our own notions of self-consciously gendered agency, because most Buddhist representations of women are constructed by male clerics for didactic purposes. Along with normative idealization of certain kinds of feminine practice and demonization of women as seductive and untrustworthy, we also find validation of women as adepts. However, these female adepts are either representations, via symbolic inversion, of Mahāyāna claims of gender-transcending nonduality or representations of female support of the androcentric Buddhist status quo. In neither case do such representations signify social or institutional legitimation of women’s practice.

There is a growing body of important work on Chinese Buddhist women’s voices in later periods, particularly Miriam Levering’s and Ding-hwa Hsieh’s work on female practitioners in the Song dynasty and Beata Grant’s work on nuns in the Ming period.⁶ In these studies (as well as in studies of writing, household practices, bodies, etc.), detailed analyses reveal the extent of premodern women’s nuanced appropriation of conventions shaped by males. While it is beyond the scope of the present article to link Bao shan practices with these studies of later periods, my presentation of these inscriptions is intended to elucidate the concerns of the Bao shan nuns by highlighting their reinscription of established practices.

I argue that the inscriptions and reinscriptions found in the Lanfeng shan memorial niches are not reducible to tropes of symbolic inversion signifying nonduality or reinforcement of the status quo and that they do provide us with evidence for social and institutional legitimation of women’s practice that was successfully created by women themselves. The feminine agency and power we see manifested at Lanfeng shan is invested in collectivity rather than individuality; communal effort marks these contributions by women to a sacred site that remains in use by women to this day. In the lives and practices enshrined at Lanfeng shan,

⁶ See Miriam Levering, “Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui,” in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 188–219; “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137–56, and “The Dragon Girl and the Abbess of Mo-shan: Gender and Status in the Ch’an Buddhist Tradition,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1982): 19–35; Ding-hwa Hsieh, “Images of Women in Ch’an Buddhist Literature of the Sung Period,” in Gregory and Getz, *Buddhism in the Sung*, 148–87, and “Buddhist Nuns in Sung China,” *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 30 (2000): 1–34; Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), and *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

we find some unusual features and even aspects vulnerable to imperial censure, but we also see imitation of well-established programs and practices. The nuns memorialized on Lanfeng shan were not included in any collection of Buddhist biographies, but neither were they “marginalized.” They were not exceptional in their views or practices, but their presence perceptibly affects the tenor of the region.

BACKGROUND OF THE BAO SHAN SITE

As I have explained above, the nuns’ niches are carved in the cliffs of Misty Peak Mountain (Lanfeng shan) and face the main mountain of the site, Treasure Mountain (Bao shan).⁷ The official history of the site begins with the sixth-century carving of two rock-cut caves dedicated to two important Buddhist masters. In 591 the site received imperial recognition and was renamed Lingquan si 靈泉寺 by Emperor Wen 文 of the Sui. Periodically restored, the site remains notable for the presence of over two hundred niches with numerous inscriptions dedicated by monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen for deceased teachers and family members. Significantly, while a few memorials for monks were carved on Lanfeng shan, the face of Bao shan itself has no memorials for nuns or laywomen. Most of the inscriptions are brief, recording the name, title, and monastery or convent of the deceased, the date of the dedication of the niche, and sometimes the names of the donors who created the memorial.

The two rock-cut cave temples on Lanfeng shan and Bao shan constitute the devotional foci of the site, and the restored Lingquan temple is situated in the valley between, in what is believed to be its original location. The earliest cave is Daliusheng 大留聖 on Lanfeng shan, carved in 546 in honor of the monk Daoping 道憑 (482–554). Daoping was the disciple of the Northern Wei master Huiguang 慧光 (468–537) who was later considered the founder of the Southern Branch of the Ten Stages (Dilun 地論) school.⁸

⁷ “Shan” means “mountain,” and may in use be literal or symbolic (i.e., in referring to a temple). As mentioned above, the site, with its two mountains and the valley between them, is collectively known as Bao shan.

⁸ The “Southern” and “Northern” designations are based on the biographies of Bodhiruci and Huiguang in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Continued lives of eminent monks], *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 太正新修大藏經 [Taisho Buddhist canon], ed. Takakusu Junjiro 高楠順次郎, 85 vols. (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kai, 1922–33), vol. 50 (no. 2060) 429a5–16, 607c19–20; all further references to the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, hereafter abbreviated as *T.*, will give the volume number followed by the document number (within parentheses) and line numbers with register letters. These biographies show two lines of affiliation based on exegesis and practice of the Yogācāra tenets of Vasubandhu’s *Daśabhūmi-vyākhyāna* (*Shidi jing lun* 十地經論), *T.* 26 (1522), a commentary on the chapter on the ten stages of the bodhisattva path in the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*. The two lines of affiliation were said to stem from disagreements between Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (d. 527) and Ratnamati 勒那摩提 regarding interpretation and translation of the *Shidi jing lun* (translated in 511).

Across the valley, on Bao shan, Dazhusheng 大住聖 cave is located about five hundred meters west of Lingquan temple, and there are numerous niches for monks and laymen above and to the west of the cave. Dedicated in 589, Dazhusheng cave was carved in honor of Daoping's disciple Lingyu 靈裕 (518–605). Lingyu was in turn the teacher of Xinxing 信行 (540–94), the founder of the Three Levels (Sanjie 三階) movement. The influences of Ten Stages and Three Levels at Bao shan become important when we come to consider the tenor of the ascetic practices mentioned in one of the Lanfeng shan inscriptions.

Cursory statistical analysis indicates that memorials for women were a significant presence at the Bao shan site. Most of the inscriptions for nuns identify them as belonging to one of the two convents, Shengdao si 聖道寺 or Guangtian si 光天寺. It is believed that these convents were located somewhere in the valley, but excavations have not yet been undertaken. When we numerically analyze the gendering of this merit-field, we find that a large number of inscriptions are concentrated in the years 640 to 687; during this period, 37 of the 63 dated inscriptions (58 percent) are for and/or by nuns and laywomen.⁹ This body of inscriptions represents 25 percent of the total of 145 inscriptions from the Sui dynasty to the Ming dynasty. Moreover, the total number of inscriptions related to women constitutes 41 percent of the Sui-Tang inscriptions.¹⁰ In other collections of Sui-Tang Buddhist biographies and inscriptions, the proportion of material on Buddhist women is much lower. The actual proportion of Bao shan/Lanfeng shan niches for women may have been even higher, but there are a large number of niches for which the inscriptions are no longer legible.

The last datable inscription for a nun was made in the Yuan dynasty, in 1357.¹¹ It appears that over time, the shrines carved in the cliffs of Lanfeng shan took on a collective character that was considered favorable for

⁹ Although the latter half of the seventh century was a period of heightened activity at Bao shan in general, the reasons for the unusually high proportion of niches for women is unclear. This period saw the gradual rise to power of the female ruler Wu Zetian 武則天 (who reigned from 684 to 705), but it would be difficult to establish connections between her increasing influence and conventual expansion in areas outside Chang'an.

¹⁰ These figures are based on the chart compiled by Ouchi Humio; his research was based on the collection of Bao shan rubbings from the Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo collection in Kyoto; he also compared this collection with other extant collections and publications. See Ouchi Humio 大内文雄, "Hōzan Reisenji sekkutsu tomei no kenkyū—Zui-Tō jidai no Hōzan Reisenji" 宝山靈泉寺石窟塔銘の研究—隋唐時代の宝山靈泉寺 [A study of the stūpa inscriptions in the Bao shan Lingquan temple caves—Bao shan Lingquan temple in the Sui and Tang dynasties], *Tōhōgaku* 69 (1997): 287–355. My text of the inscriptions is based on in situ transcription at the Bao shan site in July 2005 with the help of Professor Wang Jing (Renmin University) and Professor Shen Ruiwen (Peking University).

¹¹ Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所 [Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture], *Bao shan Lingquan si* 寶山靈泉寺 [Lingquan temple at Bao shan] (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin, 1991), 411, fig. 242.

women. In the Northern Song collection of the inscriptions of Anyang Province, the *Anyangxian jinshi lu* 安陽縣金石錄, the Bao shan area is cited as an especially auspicious place for a laywoman to dedicate an image.¹²

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE BUDDHIST NUNS

The history of women in Buddhism is long and vexed; here, I will sketch only the basic outlines. The paradigmatic first Buddhist nun was the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī. As is well known, the Buddha is said to have initially refused his cousin Ānanda's plea on behalf of the nuns but to have finally allowed the order to be formed. However, he is said to have stipulated eight special rules to formalize the nuns' subordinate status vis-à-vis monks and even male novices. This meant that the nuns' *prātimokṣa*, the code of conduct undertaken by the ordained, maintained an institutional and ritual imbalance between the two Saṅghas (the two ordained communities, of nuns and of monks) and had almost twice as many rules as that of the monks. Furthermore, the requirements for a nun's ordination were more stringent: an assembly of monks could ordain further monks, but a nun's ordination required both senior nuns and monks.

As related in the earliest Chinese work on Buddhist nuns, the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of nuns), this created problems for the first female aspirants to ordination in China. The *Biqiuni zhuan* is said to have been compiled by the monk Baochang 寶唱 in the early sixth century,¹³ and the first biography in this collection recounts the difficulties encountered by the nun Zhu Jingjian 竺淨檢 (ca. 292–ca. 361). It is said that early in the fourth century Jingjian received the ten basic precepts required of an aspirant to ordination and lived as a nun with an assembly of followers in a convent she established in Chang'an. In 357, a translation of the complete rules for nuns was finally completed, and the monk Tanmojjeduo 曇摩鞞多 (Dharmagupta)¹⁴ set up an ordination platform in order to confer the full precepts on Jingjian and her followers. However, the Chinese monk Shi Daochang 釋道昌 objected, pointing out that without a preexisting assembly of properly ordained nuns in attendance,

¹² In Yan Gengwang 嚴耕望, ed., *Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 [A new edition of historical materials carved on stone], ser. 1, 20 vols. (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1966–86), 18:13819–13948.

¹³ *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 [Lives of nuns], T. 50 (2063); for a translation of this work, see *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries*, trans. Kathryn Ann Tsai (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994). For the biography of Baochang, see the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T. 50 (2060) 426b13–427c20.

¹⁴ This may be the same person as Tanmojjeduo 曇摩鞞多, known to have been active in the Later Qin (384–417).

the ceremony would not be legitimate. Fortunately, his objections were overruled and Jingjian and three companions became the first Chinese Buddhist nuns.¹⁵ Further, it is said that in 432 (or 433) eleven nuns from Sri Lanka arrived in China by sea, led by the nun Tiesaluo 鐵薩羅 (Tessara or Dewasara). With the Indian monk Saṅghavarman officiating, an ordination ceremony for nuns was held with the proper complement of senior nuns in attendance.¹⁶ This event is mentioned in several of the *Biqiuni zhuan* biographies, but controversy as to whether or not the Chinese nuns' Saṅgha is legitimate still reverberates to this day.

While the presence of women within the Saṅgha was often a source of tension and ambivalence, the Saṅgha's day-to-day existence owed much to the support of pious laywomen. In early Buddhist literature, the paradigmatic laywoman Viṣaka is more lavishly praised than the nuns, and she is shown enjoying freedom of access to the Buddha and to senior monks that was not allowed the nuns.¹⁷ In India, lay devotional practice and support of the Saṅgha were seen as the proper sphere of women's practice, a distinction related to the brāhmaṇical meaning of Dharma as social duty; women who renounced householder life were considered to have transgressed against Dharma, but not so male renunciants. In China, Confucian cultural norms were explicitly inimical to males leaving family life and, as I will discuss in the next section, female renunciants often remained within their natal households. However, convents were established and managed to survive and sometimes flourish despite their institutional and economic dependence on the monks' Saṅgha.

For the most part, the activities of Buddhist nuns become visible in connection with urban centers or especially important Buddhist sites. We hear about nuns' connections with various convents in the *Biqiuni zhuan*, we find references to numerous convents in sources on the northern capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an, we see inscriptions dedicated by nuns at the large complex at Longmen, and we have surviving examples of nuns' prayers at Dunhuang.¹⁸ Thus, the survival of a body of material on nuns at a relatively small provincial site such as Bao shan is rendered even more visible in contrast.

¹⁵ Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 17–19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37–38, 53–55, 62–64, 69–71, 85–86.

¹⁷ See I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (1930; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 345–61.

¹⁸ For convents in Luoyang and Chang'an, see Yang Hsüan-chih, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Loyang*, trans. Yi-t'ung Wang (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), and Li Jianchao 李健超, ed., *Zengding Tang liangjing chengfang kao* 增訂唐兩京城坊考 (revised and expanded study of the city streets of the two capitals of the Tang, originally compiled by Xu Song 徐松) (Xian: San Qin 三秦, 1996). For the inscriptions at Longmen, see McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 56–59, 133–40. And for nuns' prayers at Dunhuang, see Huang Zheng 黃徵 and Wu Wei 吳偉, eds., *Dunhuang Yuanwen ji* 敦煌願文集 [Anthology of Dunhuang prayers] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe 岳麓書社, 1995).

FAMILY TIES

One point of continuity between Bao shan and other sites concerns epigraphic evidence of the persistence of family ties; in both India and China it appears that family connections and family background remained important for both monks and nuns.¹⁹ This is supported by the Bao shan inscriptions, which include memorials dedicated by family members. At Lanfeng shan there are several inscriptions dedicated by the nuns for their mothers and by disciples designated by kinship terms, although it is not clear whether the latter indicate blood or conventual relationships. The longest of these is for Meditation Master Jinggan of Shengdao temple. The inscription states that Jinggan was from Dunhuang, that her ancestors were Northern Wei gentry, and that she died in 646. The final dedication reads: “Her nieces Jingduan 靜端, Jingyin 靜因, and other followers auspiciously gathered the relics. . . . We had a stūpa carved in the mountain, and had a stone engraved with [this] inscription. We hope that this will pass down through the ages so as to be imperishable.”²⁰

Inscriptions for both monks and nuns frequently introduce the subject in terms of patrilinear family status and regional affiliations, which follows the conventions of Confucian memorials for elites. Chen Jinhua, in his article “Family Ties and Buddhist Nuns in Tang China: Two Studies,” examines in detail the role played by family circumstances in the ecclesiastic careers of two elite Tang nuns. In both cases the nuns’ epitaphs were written by male relatives, and Chen suggests that we can discern traces of the male writers’ political, secular, and individual interests expressed through the medium of epigraphic convention.²¹

Bernard Faure draws attention to the “deployment of alliance,” the traditional marking of identity within lineages of males, whether familial, vocational, or religious. This contrasts with modern “deployment of sexuality” as a means of delineating individual identities.²² “Deployment of sexuality” is a somewhat misleading shorthand for a range of discourses

¹⁹ For India, see Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), and *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997). For China, see Hao Chunwen 郝春文, *Tang houqi Wudai Songchu Dunhuang sengni de shehui shenghuo* 唐後期五代宋初敦煌僧尼的社會生活 [The social life of Buddhist monks and nuns in Dunhuang during the Late Tang, Five Dynasties, and Early Song] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1998); Jinhua Chen, “Family Ties and Buddhist Nuns in Tang China: Two Studies,” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 15, no. 2 (2002): 51–85.

²⁰ Lanfeng shan no. 42; see Ouchi, “Hōzan Reisenji sekkutsu tomei,” 314; 290, fig. 2; 348, fig. 5.

²¹ Chen, “Family Ties and Buddhist Nuns,” 81–85.

²² Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 286.

on identity, referring to Foucault's insights into the function of "individuality" not as a given but as a construct, correlative to institutional and social operations in different cultural-historical contexts, such as the development of a "scientific" discourse on sexuality. The epigraphic genre locates the individual in a network of alliances, the patrilinear family and the monastery or convent. Although it is, of course, the norm in traditional societies to subordinate gender and sexual identity to kinship identities, I suggest that nuns' attempts to erase gender characteristics and sexuality are in fact a form of "deployment of sexuality" linked with marks of heightened individuality.

In the Lanfeng shan inscriptions, references to regional and family alliances are treated as accessories to representations of Buddhist universal values. Vinaya rules and monastic practices stressed elimination of desires and attachments, and Mahāyāna ("Greater Vehicle") doctrine stressed devotional and ritual transmutation of personal relationships into universal compassion realized in emptiness. In the Bao shan inscriptions and in the biographies of Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns, nonattachment is often conveyed through the motifs of ascetic discipline and chastity. In both India and China, celibacy became a key means to mark an identity that was first and foremost Buddhist, transcending regional, cultural, and familial identities.

Jinggan's inscription claims both this-worldly family prestige and transcendent status; she is identified as having descended from the Northern Wei elite, and she is also praised for reaching the state of meditation described as "Body like dry wood, mind like dead ashes."²³ Similarly, in the two inscriptions discussed in the following two sections, we see the nuns' transcendence of body and sexuality represented through severe austerities, self-discipline, and the escape from physical senses in enlightenment. Through this "power of denial," we see the individual emerging from the matrix of cultural, regional, and kinship dispositions.

It is precisely through the subordination of kinship networks that clerics were enabled to take on a pivotal role, mediating between household networks and monastic networks. Unlike daughters and sisters who left home to be absorbed into a husband's household economy, nuns could remain part of their natal family and at the same time provide access to the beneficial networks of the Saṅgha. Entry into the Saṅgha set nuns apart from sex- and birth-compromised household dependents, whose contributions of sons and silk could not be given credit equal to their real value without

²³ This accomplishment was not yet freighted with the ambivalence it would acquire in Chan writings.

destabilizing the household economy. Medieval Chinese economic networks depended on both gift-exchange and market functions; one of the responsibilities of the head of household was to maintain control of the female labor that produced silk, a key form of currency. The limited symbolic and material resources of the household system would be in danger of depletion if there were too many autonomous agents and too many acknowledged creditors. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown, in traditional networks creditors are acknowledged through symbolic gifts, which may or may not have lasting value but are in any case markers of debt and the necessity of reciprocity, and hence place the creditor within the network of the debtor's symbolic capital. The real gift in the gift is to be admitted as a player in the circuit of giving, into the great absorbing serious game that sustained crucial social and economic relations.²⁴

THE MEMORIAL FOR SENGSHUN

The first memorial I discuss is for the nun Sengshun, who died in 639. Her epitaph, “Guangtian si gu da biqiuni Sengshun chanshi sanshen ta” 光天寺故大比丘尼僧順禪師散身塔 (Reliquary for the former great nun, Meditation Master Sengshun of Guangtian temple), reads as follows:

Meditation Master Sengshun was from the She 涉 district in Hanzhou 韓州 [Hebei], with the lay surname Zhang 張. At the age of seven she left family life and studied with her teacher, and she extensively sought the Dharma for over forty years. Suddenly meeting with the right roots for the Buddha-Dharma, she acknowledged the evil [*renwu* 認惡] and promoted the good, practiced severe austerities [*toutuo* 頭陀; Sanskrit (Skt.) *dhūta*] in eating, visualized the Buddha in the place of practice [*daochang* 道場; Skt. *bodhimaṇḍa*], and sacrificed her life with absolute diligence. Alas, alas! Her springs and autumns were eighty-five, and on the eighteenth day of the second month of the thirteenth year of the Zhenguan era [639], she died at Guangtian temple. The followers suffer greatly; they are wracked with anguish.²⁵ Those with a karmic affinity grieve and long for her, and there are none who are not moved. On the twenty-second day, [we] escorted the coffin to the place of the forest for corpses, the disciples carefully followed the protocol for “forest burial” [*linzang* 林葬], then collected the relics [*sheli* 舍利, Skt. *śarīra*], and built the stūpa on this famous mountain. [We] then carved her representation [*tuxing* 圖形] to pass down to successive generations. The epitaph says: “In her heart she maintained acknowledgment of evil and took universal reverence as the doctrine. She ceased karmic causes [*xiyuan* 息緣] and visualized the Buddha; not separating autumn and winter [i.e., unceasingly], she

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 112–34.

²⁵ The phrase “wunei bengcui” 五內崩摧 (the five organs have collapsed) probably has a meaning similar to *wunei jufen* 五內俱焚 (the five organs are completely burned up), i.e., extreme pain.

practiced the bitter destiny of severe austerities, amassing virtues as she curtailed her outward appearance [i.e., got very thin]. Entombing the cast-off remains, we carved in stone to record the merit.”²⁶

This inscription makes clear reference to practices cultivated by followers of the Three Levels movement—“acknowledging the evil” of one’s nature, universal reverence for all beings, and ascetic practice. In keeping with the doctrine of limitless giving, the Three Levels movement also adopted the practice of “forest burial,” or exposing the corpse to be eaten by other beings.²⁷

As noted in the “Background” section above, Xinxing, the founder of the Three Levels movement, was a disciple of Lingyu, the Bao shan co-founder. Lingyu’s Ten Stages exegetical tradition developed in the capital of Ye during the short-lived Eastern Wei (534–50) and Northern Qi (550–77) dynasties, where there was widespread belief that the power of the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha was spent and the Dharma had entered its final stage (*moshi* 末世 or *mofa* 末法). Both Lingyu’s and Xinxing’s writings emphasize the importance of repentance rituals and other practices suitable for beings of inferior capacity whose karmic burdens caused them to be born in the end-time.

Although Xinxing renounced his monastic vows, he continued to maintain a lifestyle that was in many ways more rigorous than the monastic norm,²⁸ and his most dedicated lay and ordained followers adhered to the same demanding regimen. This regimen was characterized by the usual practices of meditation, repentance retreats, and six daily periods of worship, with the addition of extreme austerities such as fasting and begging for food. The Three Levels program was noted for its special emphasis on the practice of “universal respect” and universal giving.²⁹

How common would it have been for a nun to commit to extreme fasting, with or without the structure of a Three Levels practice program? It is difficult to assess what was normative for the nuns at Bao shan; however,

²⁶ Lanfeng shan no. 47; see Ouchi, “Hōzan Reisenji sekkutsu tomei,” 311. See also Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, *Bao shan Lingquan si*, 94, 221, 335, 390.

²⁷ See Liu Shufen 劉淑芬, “Death and the Degeneration of Life: Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 1–30, “Shishi cuoku—zhongguo fojiao lushizang yanjiu zhi er” 石室瘞窟—中古佛教露屍葬研究之二 [Stone chamber cavity [burial]—Research on medieval Buddhist burial by corpse exposure, pt. 2], *Dalu zazhi* 大陸雜誌 98, no. 4 (1999): 49–152, and “Linzang—zhongguo fojiao lushizang yanjiu zhi yi 林葬—中古佛教露屍葬研究之一 [Forest burial—Research on Medieval Buddhist burial by corpse exposure, pt. 1], *Dalu zazhi* 大陸雜誌 96, no. 3 (1998): 22–136.

²⁸ See the biography of Xinxing, in *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T. 50 (2060) 560a. See also James B. Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001).

²⁹ Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood*, 19–24.

we may provisionally take the *Biqiuni zhuan* as an idealized model for women's practice, as was its putative author's stated intention.³⁰ The *Biqiuni zhuan* is chronologically arranged, but the preface mentions four types of exemplary practice: asceticism (*kuxing* 苦行), meditation (*changan* 禪觀), resolute chastity (*zhengu* 貞固), and spreading the Dharma (*kuangyuan fa* 曠遠法).³¹ Only one of these categories, meditation, overlaps with the ten-part categorization scheme devised by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), compiler of the *Gaoseng zhuan* (Biographies of eminent monks) and contemporary of Baochang, the compiler of the *Biqiuni zhuan*.³²

Extreme asceticism (Skt. *dhūtāṅga*) was not a separate category in hagiographic collections for monks, and it was ambivalently associated with the self-mortification practices rejected by the Buddha. Nevertheless, accounts of extreme practice were popular with the hagiographers and their audiences and found their way into a number of biographies that nominally belonged to other categories.³³ In order to contextualize here the emphasis on asceticism in Sengshun's memorial, I will use shorthand versions of three of Baochang's four categories—Dharma (intellectual engagement with Buddhist teachings), *dhyāna* (meditation), and, finally, *dhūtāṅga* (extreme asceticism)—to discuss the *Biqiuni zhuan* representations of women's practice.

According to the *Biqiuni zhuan*, nuns' accomplishments in the sphere of Dharma were highly valued, and praise for intelligence and memorization of scriptures is a common motif. A good many biographies also mention the subject's profound grasp of the meaning of the scriptures and the ability to give scriptural expositions. In one case, we also hear of a nun who wrote commentaries. The nun Zhisheng 智勝 (427–92), it is said, was able to master scriptures after hearing them only once, and Baochang writes: "She herself wrote several tens of scrolls of commentaries in which the phrasing was concise and the meaning far-reaching; her interpretations were recondite and her reasoning subtle."³⁴

³⁰ Although the provenance and degree of influence of the *Biqiuni zhuan* remains unclear, it does appear to have been well known by the early eighth century. It first appears, and is first attributed to Baochang, in Zhisheng's 智昇 catalogs, the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 [Buddhist catalog of the Kaiyuan era (713–42)], T. 55 (2154) 536c26, 538a3–11, and the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu lüechu* 開元釋教錄略出 [Condensed Buddhist catalog of the Kaiyuan era (713–42)], T. 55 (2155) 746b6.

³¹ *Biqiuni zhuan*, T. 50 (2063) 934b20–22 (in the last category, the *fa* 法 is implied); Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 16.

³² See John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 8–9, for an overview of categorization schemes in the hagiographic compilations for monks.

³³ See *ibid.*, 33–35.

³⁴ Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 74; Tsai notes that this is the only mention of a nun writing commentaries. Regarding erudite nuns, see also 21, 23, 29, 32–34, 38, 50, 69, 71, 73–74, 77, 91, 99, 103, and 106.

Nuns praised for intellectual accomplishments are almost all claimed to be members of the elite class. They were therefore connected with male and female peers, both lay and ordained, for whom participation in literati culture was not simply a marker of status and but also integral to individual and social aspects of identity.³⁵ Regarding the Bao shan inscriptions, for example, there is no reason to discount female disciples' claims that they wrote these highly literary memorials for their teachers and family members. In the second of the two inscriptions examined in this article, we will see that the nun Puxiang is praised for her teachings on difficult scriptures. However, the expositions of nuns were either not preserved or not attributed to them. In spite of evidence of their ample literary and contemplative skills, I have yet to discover any medieval Buddhist exegetical treatise ascribed to a nun. There were cultural spaces for the engagement of elite women in Buddhist literary practices, but there were no established avenues for preservation of their works.

What about *dhyāna*, meditation? As attested by the numbers of Chinese visualization scriptures and liturgical texts, devotional contemplation and visionary experience were popular forms of practice for layperson and cleric alike. In the *Biqiuni zhuan* we find a number of nuns praised for skill in reaching profound meditative states, including several references to nuns whose bodies became like wood or stone, as in the above-mentioned memorial for Jinggan.³⁶ However, the *Biqiuni zhuan* accounts and other scattered references to nuns' contemplative powers are vastly outnumbered in Chinese Buddhist literature by accounts of the contemplative, visionary, and thaumaturgic prowess of monks. The ubiquity of gender biases in the written records of traditional cultures is, of course, hardly noteworthy, but one must also bear in mind that accounts of monks' extraordinary visionary and meditational abilities performed a key function in the social and economic expansion of the Buddhist Saṅgha as a whole. In the ongoing effort to transmit the Dharma, uphold clerical rectitude and authority, and secure patronage, the experiences of nuns and laypersons remained ancillary at best.

The significance of a nun's individual accomplishments in *dhyāna* will be further explored in analysis of the next inscription. It remains here to consider the attractions of *dhūtāṅga*. Abilities in *dhūtāṅga* were visible, achievements in which excess as excellence was incontrovertible.³⁷ In references to a body like wood or stone, to self-immolation, and to fasting,

³⁵ See Peter K. Bol, "*This Culture of Ours*": *Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 32–107.

³⁶ Praise for contemplative skills is ubiquitous in the *Biqiuni zhuan*; for references to a body like wood or stone, see Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 55, 57, 59.

³⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum makes similar points regarding religious fasting among medieval Christian women. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

a nun's physical condition becomes a tangible sign of the success of her practice. Interestingly, *Biqiuni zhuan* references to erudition often go hand in hand with references to strict vegetarianism and an ascetic lifestyle.³⁸ However, the extreme fasting mentioned in Sengshun's biography is comparatively rare. The types of fasting mentioned in the *Biqiuni zhuan* include seven-day fasts to express resolve or purity, deliberate abstention from cereals for long periods, and the miraculous ability to go without food entirely. Katherine Tsai notes that certain dietary restrictions in the *Biqiuni zhuan* show derivation from Daoist immortality practices.³⁹

Buddhist literature is full of accounts of extreme practices, as well as warnings against them. The orthodox teaching of the "Middle Way" between luxury and punishing asceticism, the fruit of the Buddha's own experience of both self-indulgence and self-starvation, is offset by perennial fascination with stories of extraordinary physical endurance. We find the orthodox view expressed in the *Biqiuni zhuan*, in a passage in which a monk tells a nun weakened by fasting, "Eating is not the most important matter in Buddhism."⁴⁰ However, images of nuns pushing the physical envelope overwhelm the voice of moderation.

Sengshun's ability to "curtail her outward appearance" is an image of liberation from self, yet remained vulnerable to censure for departure from the Middle Way and attachment to a reified notion of emptiness. According to Buddhist soteriology, emptiness is both interdependence and voidness, both the functioning of virtual selves, which arise out of limitless differential/relational constructs, and the lack of inherent self-identity in any seeming entity. In later Chan Buddhist rhetoric, tangibly marked powers such as Sengshun's self-curtailment would be devalued, ostensibly because those who pursued such practices reified self-realization as a process of overcoming defilements. Ascetics, bound in the dualism of pure/impure, mistook superficial physical purity for the mark of the absolute truth of nonduality.

However, by emphasizing direct realization of Buddha-nature free from such marks, Chan monks were also reinscribing the foundational Buddhist ambivalence toward extreme practice. Prolonged fasting, like the pursuit of supernormal powers, was castigated as a spiritual dead end. Yet one must keep in mind that this compassionate advice also helped to protect transmission of monastic orthopraxy from competing and potentially destabilizing forces. Monks were canonically invested with the authority to uphold standards for validation of the exegetical and contemplative work of emptiness. Nevertheless, whether male or female, a body subsisting on

³⁸ See Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 23, 29, 32, 39, 40, 43, 61, 71, 77, 91, 99.

³⁹ Regarding seven-day fasts, see *ibid.*, pp. 28, 39, 98; on avoidance of cereals, see 51, 56, 62; on going without food, see 32, 80, 82; on links with Daoist practices, see 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

next to nothing visibly carried its own authority. In Sengshun's milieu, in the context of Three Levels practices, extreme physical denial not only conveyed prestige within the community; it also made her into a conduit to the universal field of merit that others might access through acts of reverence.

THE MEMORIAL FOR PUXIANG

The second Lanfeng shan inscription I will examine is entitled "Guangtian si da biqiuni Puxiang fashi huishen ta" 光天寺大比丘尼普相法師灰身塔 (Reliquary for the great nun Dharma Master Puxiang of Guangtian temple), dated 644. Puxiang's memorial celebrates her erudition and insight:

The Dharma Master's lay surname was Cui 崔, and [her clan] was from Boling 博陵 (Dingzhou 定州 [present-day Hebei]). Her grandfather was of Miao ancestry, and he originally left Dingzhou, separated from his clan due to an official appointment, and settled in Xiangbu 相部 (Xiangzhou 相州 [adjacent to Dingzhou]). At the age of twelve she took the tonsure, [entering] the mysterious gate. As soon as she became an ordained disciple she was determined on chastity and was settled in purity. Among her companions, she stood out from the crowd. When she was old enough, she was ordained, and she studied the Vinaya and listened to the scriptures. Her diligence was such that before long she was well versed in Vinaya texts, and she expounded on two sections of the subtle scriptures, the *Daśabhūmika* and the *Vimilakīrti*. The Dharma Master wished to open the gate of the Prajñāpāramitā, open the path of the unconditioned, convey people [out of] the great mansion [i.e., saṃsāra], and ferry people over the river of passion. Thus, this caused clergy and laypersons alike to look up to her and many followers to have faith in her. Yet extinction fundamentally is no-extinction, birth is also no-birth; with the mind of the unconditioned, one manifests the conditioned Dharma. Her springs and autumns were seventy-eight, and on the fourth day of the eighth month of the seventeenth year of the Zhenguan era of the Great Tang [643], she died at Guangtian temple. The disciples lament that the sun of wisdom has sunk its rays, grieve that the lamp of compassion is forever extinguished. [We] held her funeral according to the scriptures, and collected the relics. On the fifteenth day of the eleventh month of a Jiachen 甲辰 year, the eighteenth year of the Zhenguan era [644], on this famous mountain we carved the lofty cliff and set up the stūpa, carved her appearance [*shenyi* 神儀] in the niche, and recorded the virtues of her conduct beside her shrine. We hope that even when the kalpa is exhausted, the mountain dust will pass down her form and name.

The epitaph says: "Sending her off at that far ford—[though] for ages past tangled in the threads [of the world], once the torch of wisdom is lit, then the fuel of defilements is extinguished. Bestowing mercy and renouncing lay life, she entered the Way and sought the true. Maintaining the Vinaya and penetrating the scriptures, she experienced enlightenment 'without hearing.' The living pine is forever green, the straight bamboo is always verdant, how is it that the Dharma-artisan [*fajiang* 法匠] is so quickly overturned? [Those] nearby carve the blank

stone; [those] afar write of her excellent reputation. For a thousand autumns and ten thousand ages, may this fragrant name remain.” The disciples Purun 普閻, Shanang 善昂, Aidao 愛道, and all the fellow students reverently made this for their deceased teacher.⁴¹

Pursuing a particular facet of Puxiang’s practice, I would like to draw attention to the reference to her enlightenment. The phrase that characterizes her experience, “*wuwen*” 無聞, probably means “complete enlightenment” unobstructed by sensory experience.⁴² Memorial inscriptions and biographies for monks often celebrate their direct experience of Buddhist truth, and so this praise of Puxiang is a trope rather than a bold claim. Nevertheless, when a commemorative trope is taken across the boundary of gender, are the literary and spiritual conventions it represents seamlessly appropriated, or is its mimetic power destabilized?

Let us consider the implications of a gendered enlightenment. In *The Red Thread*, Faure writes, “The opening of Buddhism to feminine values is therefore not without risks: it threatens to affect the very content of the Buddhist awakening, traditionally perceived as a rupture, a reversal, a social drama that is reenacted endlessly by hagiographic literature. Without essentializing feminine approaches, women practitioners tend to insist on the progressive, nondramatic, intimate character of their religious experience.”⁴³ I will first take up the question of the “nondramatic” in women’s practice and will end with a discussion of the social and institutional contexts of the “intimate character” of women’s religious experience.

Faure’s caveat both signals and qualifies his awareness of what is in fact an essentializing of “feminine values,” and he does not cite a body of evidence to support the claim that women practitioners “tend to insist” on the nondramatic. However, we should also be aware that within the terms of Faure’s classic work on the Chan Buddhist “rhetoric of immediacy,” to admit or even celebrate the progressive and the nondramatic character of religious practice is a virtue to which monks should aspire. He demonstrates how the rhetoric of “sudden” (unmediated, nonprogressive) direct experience is deployed to serve sectarian ends, and how the dramatic shouts and blows of Chan literature are iconized, a form of “ritual anti-ritualism.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lanfeng shan no. 45; see Ouchi, “Hōzan Reisenji sekkutsu tomei,” 313–14; Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, *Bao shan Lingquan si*, 93, 220, 334, 392.

⁴² The phrase “*wuwen*” 無聞 technically refers to liberation as free from any dependence on conceptualization or the senses, as in the *Āgama* passage *T. 2* (104) 500c15–20. *Wen* could also be a mistake for *xian* 閒, as *wuxian* is a common Buddhist epithet for unobstructed realization.

⁴³ Faure, *The Red Thread*, 281–82.

⁴⁴ Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

It is indeed tempting to contrast the “intimacy” of feminine experience with the rhetorical and ritual violence of subitism, and I would like to be able to support Faure’s implied analogy between “feminine values” and the resistance to ideology and reification that characterizes both postmodern critique and ideal Buddhist practice. However, as Faure is also well aware, the surviving premodern women’s accounts of their own religious vocations can be rather tempestuous; the autobiographical accounts of Saint Theresa of Avila, Margery Kempe, and the Heian nun Abutsu come to mind.⁴⁵ Tales of woe and temptation run through the early Buddhist *Therigatha* (Verses of the elder nuns), violent episodes and self-immolations spice up the *Biqiuni zhuan*, and Song and Ming accounts of Chinese Buddhist nuns yield a trove of memorable incidents. It seems clear that the tendency to spiritual drama was not associated solely with male practitioners.

Although the enlightenment poems in the *Therigatha* were probably committed to writing by a monk in the first century BCE, we should not dismiss them as having nothing whatever to do with the early nuns’ images of their own practice. Even if we discredit these accounts because their production was informed by “patriarchal” values and notions of a “woman’s sphere,” we cannot assume that such representations functioned only in this circumscribed manner. Consider the following verses from the *Therigatha* about the enlightenment of the nun Siha:

Obsessed by sensuality
I never got to the origin,
but was agitated,
my mind beyond control.

I dreamed of a great happiness.
I was passionate
but had no peace.

Pale and thin
I wandered seven years,
unhappy day and night.

Then, I took a rope into the forest
and thought
I’d rather hang than go back
to that narrow life.

⁴⁵ See, respectively, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Classics, 1988); *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); and John Wallace, “Fitful Slumbers: Nun Abutsu’s *Utatane*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 43, no. 4 (1988): 391–416.

I tied a strong noose
to the branch of a tree
and put it round my neck—just then my heart was set free!⁴⁶

On the one hand, this poem reflects the misogyny and masked prurience of a monastic stereotype: the inability of women to control themselves. On the other hand, it reflects the ubiquitous Buddhist theme of the torment of the passions, and the nun Siha's enlightenment on the brink of suicide represents the anguish that both male and female disciples experience in trying to bring lust under control.⁴⁷ The heroic act of this niece of a famous military figure also recalls the self-sacrifice motif that pervades the *Jātaka* tales of the Buddha's former births.⁴⁸ The drama of Siha's suicide attempt both reflects and exceeds the conventions that inform it; such paradigms are powerful precisely because they capture the tension between boundaries and possibilities.

In the *Biqiuni zhuan*, the most dramatic episodes are those in which a woman's vocation is either inspired or strengthened by surviving a violent attack, whether by bandits or would-be rapists. For example, we read of Zhixian 智賢 (ca. 300–370), who alone among the nuns has the courage to resist a biased administrator in his attempt to weed out the Buddhist clergy. When she resists his attempt to rape her, he stabs her over twenty times with a dagger. The account concludes with the observation: "This event behind her, Zhixian redoubled her zeal in the practice of vegetarian fasts and austerities."⁴⁹

Other examples include women abducted by bandits and persecuted by rejected suitors.⁵⁰ And in contrast to tales of women who suffer greatly in order to preserve their integrity, the *Biqiuni zhuan* accounts of women who willingly sacrifice their own bodies in fiery immolation stress the practitioners' composure and apparent lack of pain. Of the nun Daozong 道綜 (d. 463) it is said: "Even though she was engulfed by flames up to her forehead, and her eyes and ears were nearly consumed, her chanting of the scriptures did not falter."⁵¹

⁴⁶ In Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the "Therīgatha"* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 52–53.

⁴⁷ There is a very similar account in the *Theragatha* (Verses of the elder monks) of the monk Sappadasa, who experiences enlightenment after having been driven to the brink of suicide by unquenchable lust; see *Khuddaka Nikaya*, bk. 8, *Theragatha* 6.6: 405–10.

⁴⁸ Interestingly, carvings of *Jātaka* tales that predate the extant text show female former births of the Buddha, but these tales were apparently not included when the *Jātaka* tales were committed to writing. See Nancy A. Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Nancy A. Falk and Rita M. Gross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 207–24.

⁴⁹ Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24, 31–32, 49–50, 74, 92–93.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60. For other examples, see pp. 52, 65, 80, 85.

In short, violent and spectacular hagiographic motifs were not confined to male protagonists, and the image of female resistance to violation provided additional dramatic scope. However, in support of Faure's valorization of a nondramatic tendency in representations of female practice, the launching point of this discussion, let us appreciate the conventional claims to distinction in Puxiang's memorial. Puxiang's chastity and discipline are lauded, and her enlightenment is said to transcend sensory experience. Does the merit of this transcendence of sexuality and physicality pertain to the practitioner, who experiences the ultimate lack of anything to which attributes could be said to "belong," or to the practice, which is so extraordinarily powerful that even a woman can achieve liberation?

Whether the reference to Puxiang's enlightenment is read as a trope or as a dramatic validation of her/Buddhist practice, the very uselessness of a nun's enlightenment sets it apart, like the crooked tree in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.⁵² In the medieval Chinese context, a nun's enlightenment was "non-progressive" in the sense that it had no permanent place within the self-legitimizing functions of Buddhist male monastic reproduction. Monastic structures and customs helped shape and assimilate individual experiences such that they could in turn validate the status quo. At Bao shan, however, the realization of a nun could only temporarily augment the male Saṅgha with which she was affiliated. Whether her talents were in exegesis, austerities, or miracles, they would not lead to her inclusion in any Buddhist lineage. In the Tang, no matter how far a nun's prestige reached in her lifetime, it would not win her a place in the annals of transmission of the Dharma to the next generation; this is attested by the fact that these inscriptions were not preserved and circulated in textual form.⁵³

Inscriptions written by the male disciples of a monk became the raw material from which hagiographies and sectarian histories were formed. Puxiang's eulogy, written by her female disciples, may have enhanced the disciples' status and even their economic security, but it was effective only within the circle of intimacy of the site itself. The intimate and local does not become subversive except in hindsight, from within the modern romantic and/or critical context in which it is upheld as counter to the institutional and universal. Yet, since "intimate" experience thereby becomes iconic and institutionalized, on what grounds can one claim that this seventh-century memorialization of Puxiang's enlightenment was subservient to the status quo, self-serving, or subversive?

Sengshun's austerities and Puxiang's exemplary discipline and scriptural mastery were attributes with time-honored, if unfixed, value. The reference to Puxiang's enlightenment, on the other hand, testifies to the

⁵² See *Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 29.

⁵³ In later periods, records of nuns did find their way into authoritative biographical collections.

timeless absolute truth of the lack of the experiencing subject herself. Her disciples lamented the evanescence of the works of this “Dharma-artisan,” in contrast to the self-replenishing verdure of the groves of pine and bamboo. Although it is unlikely that a gender distinction is intended, “artisan” is indeed an apt epithet for a woman who could, with hard labor, produce simulacra of standard Buddhist marks of achievement such as scriptural exposition, enlightenment, and the master-disciple relationship.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, her lifework could only refer to the “natural” world it represented, the “forever green . . . always verdant” continuity of male monastics’ transmission of the Dharma.

ACTIVE VOICES

In “Voices of Dissent: Women in Early Chan and Tiantai,” Faure argues that the case of two Tiantai nuns, sisters who criticized the powerful “Northern school” Chan master Puji 普寂 (651–739), presents us with a rare example of women actively questioning the male-dominated status quo. While recognizing the sectarian agendas and hagiographic elements of the inscription valorizing these Tiantai nuns, Faure argues that nonetheless the inscription stands as a unique testament of individual feminine agency, an active challenge to the patriarchal religious and political order. Briefly, the story is that the two nuns depreciate Puji’s level of enlightened awareness, and when Puji demands that they be censored, his disciple Yixing 一行 (683–727), sent as an imperial representative of Puji’s interests, instead becomes impressed by them. In the end, they are honored by Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗.⁵⁵

Faure claims that this account of uppity nuns contrasts with other materials that apparently valorize women while in fact reinforcing patriarchal norms. In *The Red Thread*, he argues that even if women’s voices are preserved, what we hear is only an echo of androcentric cultural constructions: “We have very few documents written by Buddhist women, and even those, like those of many female Christian mystics, use a predominantly male language and imagery. From a certain feminist standpoint, one could even consider that their discourse reinforces dominant male norms instead of rejecting or subverting them.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Regarding the term “Dharma-artisan” (*fajiang* 法匠), metaphorical use of the term “artisan” or “craftsman” could appear in a variety of contexts. For example, in the *Biqiuni zhuan* biography of Faquan 法全, Faquan is referred to as a “master artisan” (*shijiang* 師匠) in the secret methods of *samādhi*, see *T. 50* (2063) 943b12. In the biography of Jinghui 淨暉, it is said that after ten years of hard study of Buddhist exegesis, she became a *zongjiang* 宗匠, a “craftsman of the clan/school”; see *T. 50* (2063) 943b23.

⁵⁵ Bernard Faure, “Voices of Dissent: Women in Early Chan and Tiantai,” *Zenbunka kenkyūsho kiyō* 24 (1998): 27–30.

⁵⁶ Faure, *The Red Thread*, 11.

Nor can we let ourselves be seduced by symbolic inversion; we cannot look for validation of the social power of women in canonical Buddhist works that feature episodes in which a female outwits or outshines a male, or in Chan stories featuring old ladies who sharply defeat monks in “encounter dialogue,” or in Tantric works that symbolize wisdom as feminine. Faure writes: “As we know, sex and gender symbolism is extremely multivocal, and Buddhism is no exception in this respect. Feminine symbols, for instance, cannot be read simply as a reassertion of feminine values. In a teaching like Tantrism, where reversal and inversion are the name of the game, one should therefore not be surprised to see the allegedly inferior, that is, women, exalted as superior. This symbolic reversal characterizes only a liminal, paradoxical stage, and does not affect in practice the socially inferior status of women.”⁵⁷

Faure’s warning against superficial readings of classic rhetorical manipulations of gender will seem unnecessary in academic contexts. However, he is not addressing a mere straw man (or woman). One must not forget that Buddhist studies is blessed with a popular fan base with an appetite for works that sometimes fail to make these critical distinctions.

At the same time, I would like to highlight internal contradictions and lacunae in Faure’s construction of the uniquely “active voices” of the two Tiantai nuns. Specifically, if one construes agency as self-conscious challenge of the status quo, one misses spaces opened up by nonchallenging collective activity. Faure’s singling out of the Tiantai nuns is grounded in a notion of power as a property of the individual; in this case, however, power is a property of the double. He deploys one of his fundamental theses regarding the hagiographic construction of magical powers as the basis of Buddhist social and political power: “The hagiographical topos is clear when the author implies that the two sisters’ true master, the strange nun named Konggu, was actually a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra—in female form. This emphasis on the nuns’ powers should perhaps also be understood against the background of their disagreement with Puji. Significantly, Puji’s popularity derived in large part from the psychic powers that were attributed to him. . . . Thus, the attribution of psychic powers was essential in establishing the credentials of a Buddhist master. The same was apparently true in the case of the nuns.”⁵⁸

As a counterpoint to Faure’s emphasis on the confrontation between opposing masters of supernatural powers as the basis of social and political validation, let us consider the function of doubling in this story. The sisters are as if twins and are not given individual identities. Their ability

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵⁸ Faure, “Voices of Dissent,” 37.

to challenge the dominant order cannot be separated from their special charismatic status as anomalous creatures, double prodigies who are secretly taught by a bodhisattva-in-disguise. Notably, the *Biqiuni zhuan* also features a pair of special sisters who mysteriously disappear and then reappear with miraculous skills, having been tonsured and instructed by a bodhisattva-like nun in the Pure Land.⁵⁹ Like Western “divine twins,” these figures serve a paradigmatic function and are in this respect analogous to other well-known “symbolic inversions” such as the Nāga princess in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the goddess in the *Vimilakīrti*. The Tiantai nuns are *lusus naturae*, duly investigated by the imperial representative, the famous Master Yixing, and subsequently given imperial recognition.⁶⁰

Whether or not we can allow ourselves to be persuaded that some trace of a historical gendered “voice of dissent” can be recovered from within the sectarian and symbolic meshes of this story, what I am challenging (with due awareness of the ironies involved) is the imputation that challenge is the most significant form of subaltern agency. Rather than searching for individual voices as the loci of agency, I would like to highlight the power of community evident in the Lanfeng shan inscriptions and point out ways that their collective aspect shapes the character of the site.

Not incidentally, it is precisely communal power that the Three Levels movement was especially effective in mobilizing. Three Levels texts promoted donations at a specific site as collective and eternal, as opposed to the incomplete and short-lived merit of individual giving. The resultant “inexhaustible treasury” at Huadu temple was so wildly successful that it provoked imperial envy and alarm and probably contributed to the multiple proscriptions leveled against the texts and practices of the sect.⁶¹

Traces of liturgical and devotional practices in the Bao shan caves and inscriptions show that elements of Lingyu’s soteriological program and his disciple Xinxing’s popular movement persisted into the seventh century. There is no indication that the inhabitants of Bao shan ever regarded it as an exclusive Three Levels site, but it is possible that Three Levels notions of communal giving and collective liberation played a role in the remarkable mobilization of resources necessary to create and maintain two separate but similar “groves” of memorial niches. At the same time, Bao shan and Lanfeng shan preserve traces of networks, programs, and practices of potentially oppositional strands of Buddhism—exegetical and cultic, imperial and eschatological—and it is also perhaps this eclecticism

⁵⁹ Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns*, 67–68.

⁶⁰ Faure himself notes the sectarian agendas at work in this inscription, which was written some forty years after the deaths of the nuns and well after Shenhui’s criticism of Puji had become widely disseminated; see Faure, “Voices of Dissent,” 30–36.

⁶¹ Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood*, 189–222.

and mingling of types that allowed a space for commemoration of women's collective and individual practice.

These multiple differential traces point to the issue of boundaries and hierarchies, which are essential to the construction of the collective. Faure writes of the importance of boundaries in normative Buddhist discourse: "The point was also for clerics to distinguish themselves clearly as a group from lay practitioners, to draw conspicuous and hard-to-cross boundaries. Such was perhaps the main function of the Vinaya and its rites of passage, which are above all rites of demarcation. We noted the violent reaction of Vinaya legislators against those strange individuals, neither fish nor fowl, called *pañḍaka*: beings who, by blurring genres and genders, seem to escape the 'law of the genre' (*loi du genre*)."⁶²

At Bao shan and Lanfeng shan, one notable genre-blurring feature is that although the stūpa-niches for laymen and laywomen show a clear distinction in dress and posture, these laypersons are nevertheless individually portrayed in niches with dignity and size equal to that of the images of clerics.⁶³ Moreover, there is a niche, unfortunately lacking an inscription, in which a figure who is probably a nun sits side by side with a laywoman.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the law of the genre is also upheld at Bao shan in a very noticeable manner: the niches for monks and laymen are mostly on Bao shan itself, while the niches for nuns and laywomen are all on Lanfeng shan, with only a few monks among them. Although we cannot be sure of the strictness of this divide due to the large number of niches for which neither image nor inscription has survived, there was clearly intentional segregation at work. When contrasted with the relaxed boundary between lay and clerical niches, this separation of the sexes could be taken as an indication that gender hierarchies remained more fundamental than religious ones.

One can only guess at what it might have meant to a Buddhist nun to belong to a place that was defined by the symmetry of a separate but comparable mountain of women's relics, a growing merit-field fed by a cluster of convents. As with the epitaphs for elite married women, the virtues recorded in the nuns' inscriptions are understood to redound to the credit of the husband's clan; that is, the Saṅgha. However, the inscription of these intimately interrelated traces into a landscape also evokes the

⁶² Faure, *The Red Thread*, 280.

⁶³ Bao shan nos. 82, 83, 119, 120; Lanfeng shan nos. 41, 48, 55, 56, 75, 81.

⁶⁴ Lanfeng shan no. 64. For one of the Chinese custodians of the site, this juxtaposition elicited the interesting interpretation that the figures represented a monk and a laywoman and were thus a very early indication of "Tantric" sexual practices in China. (The images of the monks and nuns at Bao shan and Lanfeng shan are androgynous and cannot be sexed without the aid of an accompanying inscription.) Suggested by a man who was not uneducated in Buddhist iconography, this supposition shows that the simple pairing of lay and cleric on an equal footing is considered queer enough to bring a "transgressive" analogy to mind.

potency of a collectively compiled text with its own identity. In spite of countervailing currents in cultural practice, these inscriptions remain. Their survival allows us to imagine a Tang-era “*Xu gao biqiuni zhuan*” (Continued lives of eminent nuns) comparable to the celebrated *Xu gaoseng zhuan* (Continued lives of eminent monks); it is as if a few of its unwritten pages are carved into the cliffs of Lanfeng shan.⁶⁵

We can take the practices at Bao shan in review and find that they are unexceptional, supporting rather than subverting mainstream cultural values. Nevertheless, by drawing on the resources of familial and devotional alliances, by deploying idealized images of mastery over the body, by using tropes signifying the indeterminable realm of direct experience, and by conforming to a gendered symmetry imposed on the landscape, the female devotees at Bao shan collectively managed to create a unique site, “a niche of their own.”

Barnard College/Columbia University

⁶⁵ There is an early twentieth-century “*Xu biqiuni zhuan*” 續比丘尼傳, by the monk Zhenhua 震華, that includes biographies of Tang nuns; see *Biqiuni zhuan quanji* 比丘尼傳全集 (Taipei: Fojiao shuju, 1988).