

Revisiting Questions about Female Disciples in the *Lidai fabao ji* (Record of the Dharma-Treasure through the Generations)

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The *Lidai fabao ji* 曆代法寶記 (Record of the Dharma-Treasure through the Generations) is an early Chan/Zen work that contributed styles and forms to what would later become the transmission history (*chuandeng lu* 傳燈錄) and discourse record (*yulu* 語錄) genres. It was probably compiled in Sichuan sometime between 778 and the early 780s by unnamed disciples of the Bao Tang 保唐 founder Wuzhu 無住 (714–774). Wuzhu and his group were known and criticized by other clerics for rejecting the norms of temple practice. In his Dharma-talks in the *Lidai fabao ji*, Wuzhu scorns worship of icons, liturgical devotions, and the transactions of merit. Members of his community also seem to have practiced as monks and nuns without taking formal ordination.

In this essay in honor of John McRae, I would like to revisit questions of authorship raised in my study and translation of the *Lidai fabao ji*, with gratitude for the invaluable thoughtful suggestions and support he offered in the course of its completion. In *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Contexts*, I suggested that the two female disciples mentioned in the *Lidai fabao ji* may have had authorship roles.¹ Here I will present further possibilities with regard to the family background of one of these female disciples.

The *Lidai fabao ji* makes a significant contribution to the records of Chinese women's practice, for it not only provides brief but intriguing glimpses of Buddhist women, it is also the first text to feature Chan nuns, the disciples Changjingjin 常精進 and Liaojianxing 了見性. Given the then-emerging Chan penchant for inverting social norms,

1. Wendi L. Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

we might wonder if their prominence in the text served merely symbolic functions. Bernard Faure has characterized Changjingjin's and Liaojianxing's roles as supporting the status quo, and also argues that Chan encounter dialogues featuring women represent the typical Chan rhetorical ploy of upending conventional expectations.² However, when we review the particular ways that women in the *Lidai fabao ji* are shown both upholding the status quo and overturning norms, then a subtly different picture emerges. In these pages I discuss the possibility that the family background of one of Wuzhu's female disciples may be traceable in the historical record, providing more context for the scenes featuring women in the *Lidai fabao ji*.

As I have discussed at greater length elsewhere, women appear unexpectedly in the *Lidai fabao ji* version of key events in Chan history. First, a nun is introduced into the group of the legendary First Patriarch Bodhidharma's closest disciples. The *Lidai fabao ji* appears to be the original source for this story, claiming that Bodhidharma classified his disciples' levels of insight according to who received his marrow, bones, and skin. In a famously provocative line, Bodhidharma says that the nun Zongchi 惣持 is "the one who got my flesh." Next, Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) is said to receive Bodhidharma's "robe of transmission" from the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713) and pass it on to the Bao Tang ancestral teacher Zhishen 智詵 (609–702). Not only does the woman who was later cast as a violent usurper of the Tang throne thus become a kind of intermediary transmission-holder, she is also portrayed in an unusually sympathetic manner. Then, in the biography of Wuzhu's master Wuxiang 無相 (684–762), formerly a Silla prince, it is claimed that Wuxiang's sister slashed her face out of a desire to maintain her vow of chastity, and this motivated him to become a monk. This account of Wuxiang's vocation is also found only in the *Lidai fabao ji*. Furthermore, one of Wuzhu's male disciples brings his mother with him to live in Wuzhu's community, and in one of his sermons Wuzhu chastises a group of laymen who want to abandon their families and become his disciples.³

2. See Bernard Faure, "Voices of Dissent: Women in Early Chan and Tiantai," *Zenbunka kenkyūjo kiyō* 禅文化研究所紀要 24 (1998): 27–30; Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 281.

3. See Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 154; 182–83; 226–237.

The most significant passages concern Wuzhu's first encounters with the disciples Changjingjin 常精進 and Liaojianxing 了見性. Changjingjin is identified as the daughter of Administrator Murong 慕容 of Qingzhou 慶州 in Gansu. She accompanies her family when they go to pay reverence to the Chan master. When Changjingjin hears him speak, she cites her female condition as evidence of karmic obstacles, and states her determination to be liberated nonetheless. Wuzhu replies:

“If you are capable of such [resolution], then you are a great hero (*dazhangfu er* 大丈夫兒), why are you ‘a woman’?” He then tells her: “No-thought is thus no ‘male,’ no-thought is thus no ‘female.’ No-thought is thus no-obstruction, no-thought is thus no-hindrance. No-thought is thus no-birth, no-thought is thus no-death. At the time of true no-thought, no-thought itself is not. This is none other than cutting off the source of birth and death.”⁴

There is a moment of wordless mutual understanding: “... her eyes did not blink and she stood absolutely still. In an instant, the Venerable knew that this woman had a resolute mind.” He gives Changjingjin and her mother Dharma names, and the two women take the tonsure together. Changjingjin then brings her cousin, and Wuzhu also gives a Dharma-talk for her:

Later, they brought a younger female cousin with the surname Wei 韋, who was the grand-daughter of Chancellor (*zaixiang* 宰相) Su 蘇. She was quick-witted and clever, extensively learned and knowledgeable, and when asked a question she was never without an answer. She came to pay obeisance to the Venerable, and the Venerable saw that she was obdurate and determined on chastity (*zhicao* 志操), and so he expounded the Dharma for her: “This Dharma is not caused and conditioned, it has neither false nor not-false, and has neither truth nor not-truth. ‘Transcending all characteristics is thus all Dharmas.’ ‘The Dharma is beyond eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, the Dharma transcends all contemplation practices.’⁵ No-thought is thus no-practice, no-thought is thus no-contemplation. No-thought is thus no-body, no-thought is thus no-mind. No-thought is thus no-nobility, no-thought is thus no-lowliness. No-thought is thus

4. T. 2075, 51: 192a24–b7; Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 379–80.

5. From the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 (*Vimalakīrti-sūtra*), T. 475, 14: 540a16–17.

no-high, no-thought is thus no-low. At the time of true no-thought, no-thought itself is not.”

When the woman had heard his talk, she joined her palms together and told the Venerable, “Your disciple is a woman whose obstructions from transgressions are very weighty, but now that I have heard the Dharma, stain and obstruction are completely eliminated.” So saying she wept grievously, a rain of tears. She then requested a Dharma name, and she was named Liaojianxing (Completely Seeing the Nature). When she had been named, she tonsured herself and donned robes, and became a leader among nuns.⁶

In the *Lidai fabao ji* narrative, these women emerge as two of the three most faithful long-term disciples among Wuzhu’s followers. Wuzhu bestows on Changjingjin a conventional term of praise for a brave man, “*dazhangfu er*” or “great-hero-male/son.”⁷ Describing use of a similar phrase in a letter from the Song dynasty Chan master Dahui 大慧 (1089–1163) to a female lay devotee, Miriam Levering argues that Dahui’s fulsome praise gives an impression of condescension. She says:

The rhetoric of equality cannot stand up against the rhetoric of masculine heroism, when the latter is supported by gender distinctions so “real” to the culture, and remain unambiguous. In this sermon Ta-hui says, “You see her as a woman, but she is a *ta-chang-fu*, a great hero.” This is as unambiguous a statement of equality as this rhetoric can yield. But it is not so different from the formulation several times repeated elsewhere in Ta-hui’s records, “Even though you are a woman, you have the will of a *ta-chang-fu*,” a formulation that shows the androcentric character of Chinese Buddhism in general and of Ch’an in particular.⁸

Wuzhu’s praise could be taken as a similar mark of condescension. However, if we are open to the possibility that Changjingjin and Liaojianxing were recording their own encounters, then we might also consider the possibility that the epithet of honorary masculinity may have been meant as a mark of their inclusion in a community of peers. In the *Lidai fabao ji*, the two young women are said to have become

6. T. 2075, 51: 192b7–18; Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 380–81.

7. See Miriam Levering, “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), 137–156.

8. Ibid.

“leaders among nuns,” while remaining in a small iconoclastic community whose legitimacy was contested by other clerics. Like the legendary Layman Pang’s (Pang Yun 龐蘊, 740–808) unconventional daughter Lingzhao 靈照,⁹ Liaojianxing and Changjingjin appear to have given up marriage and do not seem to have been officially ordained.

The kind of figure validated by the sum of the *Lidai fabao ji* stories is revealing: that of a young girl who refuses marriage, a nun who suddenly appears among the better-known male disciples of a famous master, and a powerful aristocratic woman who secretly holds the true Dharma robe in trust. The two well-connected and well-educated young women who became Wuzhu’s disciples could conceivably have seen themselves in these roles.

Another elite laywomen who is mentioned in the historical record appears in a supporting role in the *Lidai fabao ji*. Her name is Ren 任, wife of Cui Gan 崔旰, the Governor of Chengdu. In the *Lidai fabao ji*, both are said to be Bao Tang supporters. Ren is shown arranging the vegetarian feast in which Wuzhu’s enemies are exposed and discredited, and she and her husband pay a visit to Wuzhu.¹⁰ Cui Gan, a.k.a. Cui Ning 崔寧, was originally from Henan, but he used his military position to become a virtual ruler in the Shu 蜀 region. Wuzhu’s patron Du Hongjian 杜鴻漸 (709–769) was sent in to control him, but Cui Gan’s military power in the area remained uncontested. There is no other record indicating the kind of Buddhist devotion and humble behavior we find him exhibiting in the *Lidai fabao ji*. In his biography in the *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Old Tang History), his wife Ren is mentioned as having bravely fought rebels during an attack on Chengdu while Cui Gan was away at court.¹¹

In his 2005 study of the hagiographies of Huineng, John Jorgensen responded to my surmise about the possibility that the two female

9. The *Pang jushi yulu* 龐居士語錄 (Recorded Sayings of Layman Pang) is a Chan classic said to include the verses of the Buddhist layman Pang Yun 龐蘊 (740–808) and a collection of anecdotes written by his friend Yu Di 于頔 (d. 818) soon after Pang’s death. However, the *Pang jushi yulu* did not appear until the Song, and the earliest extant edition is from 1486; see Tan Wei 譚偉, *Pang jushi yanjiu* 龐居士研究 (Research on Layman Pang) (Chengdu: Sichuan minzu, 2002).

10. See Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 356, 364.

11. *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Old Tang History), 945, by Liu Xu 劉昫 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 117:3397–3404.

disciples may have compiled the *Lidai fabao ji* with the following objections:

- 1) Cui Gan was said to have raped the wives and daughters of the officials in the region, and therefore would not have received such a favorable portrayal at the hands of a woman.
- 2) The colloquial language of the *Lidai fabao ji* would be “unseemly” for a pious laywoman.¹²

In response, let me first state that I am not immovably wedded to my hypothesis. However, certain counter-arguments do seem plausible. The charges against Cui Gan are in his Jiu Tang shu biography, where it is also made clear that he was an upstart who seriously challenged imperial power in Sichuan, was given a post in Chang’an in order to weaken his hold on Chengdu, and was assassinated for treason. It is not unknown for the official histories to exaggerate or fabricate charges of violence and perversion against those who challenged established authority. Moreover, are we to accept the implication that a male Bao Tang advocate would have been more likely to draw a favorable portrait of a rapist?

I find Jorgensen’s second point about the incongruity of the language of the *Lidai fabao ji* to be as interesting as it is irresolvable. Since the writings of Tang pious laywomen have not been extensively preserved, we do not really know what kind of language they could have used. One might also argue that a person not trained for an official position may have been less constrained by stylistic norms and would have felt more free to record Wuzhu’s language and earthy stories as they were told, without polish. In fact, the text’s emphasis on Liaojianxing’s noble lineage and superior intellectual capacities stands out as unusual, in a literary setting where social and exegetical conceits are regularly exposed and undercut by Wuzhu.

Jorgensen seems to have become more open to the idea of the female cousins’ authorship roles, for in his 2008 review of *The Mystique of Transmission*, he proposed possible candidates for Liaojianxing’s grandparent and parents.¹³ He suggested that among chancellors sur-

12. John Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch’an* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 562.

13. See John Jorgensen, “Review of Wendi L. Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Contexts*,” *T’oung Pao* 94, nos. 4–5

named Su in the appropriate era, the most likely candidate for her grandfather may be none other than the famous literatus Su Ting 蘇頌 (670–727), Duke of Wenxian 文憲 of Xu 許, who served in various important official posts from the reigns of Wu Zetian (r. 690–705) to Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756). His compositional abilities were highly valued, but after complaints about over-harshness leveled against certain policies of his senior fellow-chancellor Song Jing 宋璟 (663–737), he was implicated in the criticism and demoted in 720. He was sent to Jiannan 劍南 (Sichuan) to serve as governor and inspector. He was headquartered in Yizhou 益州 from 720 to 724 and continued to serve Xuanzong until his death in 727.¹⁴ His Buddhist interests are also indicated by his participation as lay collaborator in Yijing’s 義淨 (635–713) translation project at Jianfu 薦福 temple in Chang’an in ca. 706–710.¹⁵ Su Ting’s connections in Jiannan (where Wuzhu’s Bao Tang group would later form) included two families with the surname Wei, Liaojianxing’s family name.

One was Wei Kang 韋抗 (d. 726), governor of Yizhou from 715–716. In his memorial for Wei Kang, Su Ting mentions three sons, two of whom he seems to have known.¹⁶ The other was Wei Baozhen 韋抱貞, prefect of Zizhou 資 (梓) 州 in Jiannan,¹⁷ for whom Su Ting wrote a melancholy memorial poem.¹⁸ It is possible that Wei Baozhen’s son Wei Zheng 韋政, a minor official in Hanzhou 漢州 (a sub-prefecture of

(2008): 372–376; see also Cen et al., eds. (1948) 1994, 1.2: 151–152.

14. *Jiu Tang shu*, 88:2880–2884; *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (New Tang History), 1060, by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 125:4399–4403.

15. See Jinhua Chen, “Another Look at Tang Zhongzong’s (r. 684, 705–710) Preface to Yijing’s (635–713) Translations: With a Special Reference to Its Date,” *Indo tetsugaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* インド哲学仏教学研究 11, no. 3 (2004): 12–13.

16. See *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (Complete Prose of the Tang Dynasty), comp. 1814, ed. Dong Gao 董誥 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 258:1172b–c.

17. *Xin Tangshu* 74A, 3045; 3096.

18. *Ye wen gu Zizhou Wei Shijun ming dang yin fu gan er chengzhang* 夜聞故梓州韋使君明當引緋感而成章, in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Complete Poetry of the Tang Dynasty), comp. 1705, ed. Cao Yin 曹寅 and Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 74.

Yizhou),¹⁹ married one of Su Ting's daughters, and Liaojianxing could have been their daughter. If so, then she may have been orphaned at a young age; Han Yu's 韓愈 (768–824) memorial for Wei Zheng's son Wei Dan 韋丹 (752–810) notes that Wei Dan was orphaned and raised by his great-uncle.²⁰

If Wei Dan was indeed Liaojianxing's brother, then she was closely related to an illustrious local official who was memorialized by Han Yu, one of the most interesting literary figures of his day.²¹ Furthermore, Wei Dan also appears to have cultivated Buddhist connections. The monk Lingche 靈澈 (746–816), who wrote the preface to the *Baolin zhuan*²² and was a disciple of the famous monk-poet Jiaoran 皎然 (730–799), wrote the poem *Donglin si chou Wei Dan cishi* 東林寺酬韋丹刺史 (At Donglin Monastery: In Answer to Governor Wei Dan):

In old age my mind is not bothered by worldly affairs,
 年老心閒無外事
 A hempen robe and sitting mat will do for me.
 麻衣草座亦容身
 Everyone I meet praises retirement from office,
 相逢盡道休官好
 but do you see any of them down here in the woods?
 林下何曾見一人²³

We could easily imagine these down-to-earth observations uttered by Chan Master Wuzhu as he is portrayed in the *Lidai fabao ji*. In between the *Lidai fabao ji* accounts of Dharma-talks and Dharma-battles, we are shown loving snapshots of Wuzhu that reveal the wit,

19. See *Quan Tang wen* 754, a memorial for Wei Baozhen's son Wei Dan 韋丹 by Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852).

20. *Quan Tang wen* 566:2570a–c.

21. Han Yu may not have been as famous then as he is now, but the inclusion of his memorial for Wei Dan in the *Quan Tang wen* marks the latter with enduring prestige. Though already once-exiled, at the time Han Yu was not yet infamous: his *Jiaying fogu biao* 諫迎佛骨表 (Admonitory Memorial on Welcoming the Buddha-Bone) was written in 819.

22. *Baolin zhuan* 寶林傳 (Transmission of the Baolin [Temple]). 801, by Zhiju 智炬. In *Zhongguo fojiao congshu: Chanzong bian* 中國佛教叢書 禪宗編 (Compendium of Chinese Buddhism: Chan School) (Beijing: Jiangsu guji, 1993), 1.18:507–659.

23. Mary M.Y. Fung and David Lunde, trans., *A Full Load of Moonlight* (Hong Kong: Musical Stone Culture LTD., 2014), 28.

self-importance, and occasional ill-humor of a living master rather than a living Buddha. Whoever Liaojianxing's blood relations may have been, the *Lidai fabao ji* highlights her exclusive devotional commitment to this imposing master and his Dharma family.

In the *Lidai fabao ji* episodes featuring women, the iconic feminine virtues of chastity and faith are praised. However, as highlighted in the Dharma-talks given by Wuzhu in the excerpts above, the central practice and object of devotion is presented as the contemplative practice of no-thought (*wunian* 無念). The stories of Changjingjin's and Liaojianxing's encounters with Wuzhu echo the emotional fervor of traditional hagiographic narratives of a disciple's intuitive recognition of the master he will serve for life. At the same time, their instantaneous complete acceptance of Wuzhu's teachings is not unlike the sudden-awakening encounters of later Chan literature. Wuzhu is shown affirming their resolution and their understanding and accepting them as worthy disciples, while Changjingjin and Liaojianxing are shown to be immediately transformed: "stain and obstruction are completely eliminated."

Changjingjin's and Liaojianxing's connections with their teacher are framed with terms of commitment familiar from the stories of male master-disciple bonds that are celebrated in both standard hagiographical collections and later Chan transmission histories. Yet the *Lidai fabao ji* encounters also sometimes seem more quirky and personal than the iconic patriarchal antics of later Chan stories and kōans. As I have discussed elsewhere, the text is a pastiche of styles and voices, from extensive scriptural quotations to the colloquial stories that Jorgensen considered rather unladylike. To whatever degree these accounts reflect the actual lives of Wuzhu's disciples, it is significant that these portrayals of Dharma-kinship included women whose family backgrounds may be traceable in the historical records. The possibility of their authorship or co-authorship of the *Lidai fabao ji* opens up a window into an unusual Tang Buddhist community in which self-tonsured nuns may have practiced on the same footing as their brethren, with the skills and authority to compose the only surviving literary relic of their community.

