

Da Zhangfu: The Gendered Rhetoric of Heroism and Equality in Seventeenth-Century Chan Buddhist Discourse Records*

Beata Grant

(Washington University in St. Louis)

Abstract

This article looks at some of the different ways in which the use of the term “*da zhangfu*” or “great gentleman” is exercised in the writings of seventeenth-century Buddhist monks and laymen in reference to religious women. These uses reflect a wide range of opinion on the question of whether or not women had the strength and determination to embark on the Chan Buddhist path of spiritual training. The attitudes expressed by these male writers range from undisguised disapproval to qualified skepticism to wholehearted support and admiration. Regarded as a whole, they reflect the ongoing ambivalence towards religious women as well as the unquestionable changes in attitude, that marked the seventeenth-century.

Keywords

Buddhist laywomen, Buddhist nuns, rhetoric of heroism, honorary males, discourse records

Introduction

Sometime around 1676, a young Japanese woman of noble birth took the tonsure at a Linji (Rinzai) 臨濟 temple and became the nun Ryōnen 了然 (1646-1711). In 1678, she went to Edo to find a master with whom to study at the new Obaku (Huangbo 黃檗) school of Zen Buddhism, which had been recently brought to Japan by Chinese

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *Nan Nü* workshop held in Schengen, Luxembourg in June 2005. My special thanks to Paul Ropp for making this workshop possible, and for Harriet Zurndorfer for organizing it.

masters. She visited one Japanese Obaku master and was turned away. She then went to Hakuō Dōtai 白翁道泰 (d. 1682), a Japanese Dharma heir of the Chinese Obaku master, Mu'an Xingtao 木菴性滔 (1611-84) and again was turned away because, we are told, of her great beauty. Determined to fulfill her goal of entering the religious life, Ryōnen pressed a burning iron into her face, leaving it greatly disfigured. Hakuō was so shocked—and impressed—that he accepted her as his disciple, and four years later she received his Dharma transmission and eventually went on to establish a convent of her own. “There was nothing particularly Japanese or even Buddhist about this mind-set,” comments Barbara Ruch, “the crux of it runs blatantly and constantly through the anxieties of almost all of the male leaders and formulators of doctrine of the world’s major religions. Neither Obaku Zen monks nor practitioners were unique in this regard.”¹

Ruch is correct in noting that this particular misogynist mindset is by no means unique to either Japan or Buddhism. In China, for example, there is the story of the famous Daoist woman practitioner, Sun Bu’er 孫不二, who is said to have disfigured her face in order to travel unmolested. And, as anyone who has read anything about the history of women in imperial China knows, there are many accounts of virtuous Chinese ladies who mutilated or killed themselves rather than put their chastity in jeopardy. As far as I know, however, there are relatively few records of Buddhist women in China who mutilated themselves in order to gain admittance to the religious life, although many did indeed threaten to fast until death. This is not to say that mutilation is any worse than attempted suicide, but rather to point out that, at least in the Chinese Buddhist discourse record texts (*yulu* 語錄) that are the focus of the present article, it was usually not the feminine appearance, with its potential to arouse lust and desire in others, that seemed to be the problem, but rather the feminine character, which was deemed to be too emotional and weak to undergo and sustain the arduous discipline required of a Chan Buddhist monastic practitioner.² In fact, only the

¹ Barbara Ruch tells this story in her essay, “Prologue: Burning Iron Against the Cheek: A Female Cleric’s Last Resort,” in Barbara Ruch, ed., *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Pre-Modern Japan* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), lxvii.

² Discourse records are collections of Dharma talks, letters, poems, and other writings of Chan Buddhist masters, often collected and printed by the master’s disciples after his or her

exceptional woman who possessed extraordinary “manly” determination could ever hope to embark on serious Chan practice, much less succeed in achieving realization. By the same token, however, Chan Buddhism built its entire religious identity on the principle of nonduality and of seeing directly and in an unmediated fashion into one’s intrinsic Buddha nature, a nature that was by definition beyond all binary dichotomies, including that of male and female. In this way, female aspirants to enlightenment were placed in a double bind: in order to realize the emptiness of that which was traditionally labeled “male” and “female,” they had to abandon their femaleness, and all that this traditionally implied, and assume the traditional characteristics of a man, or rather, of a *great man*, a *da zhangfu* 大丈夫.

Returning again to seventeenth century Japan, we can see an example of this in the response of the Chinese monk Jifei Ruyi (Sokuhi Nyoitsu) 即非如一 (1616-71) to a Japanese woman who came to him for religious guidance. Jifei Ruyi had been summoned to Japan in 1664 by Yinyuan Longqi (Ingen Ryūki) 隱緣隆琦 (1592-1673), one of the major figures in the establishment of the Obaku Zen lineage in Japan. Ten years later, Jifei Ruyi was preparing to return to China but was persuaded to remain by the Lord of Kokura 小倉 and, eventually, he became founding abbot of an important Obaku temple.³ In the end, Jifei Ruyi died in Nagasaki in 1671 without ever returning to his homeland. In Jifei Ruyi’s discourse record collection there are several Dharma talks addressed to both nuns and laywomen (including the wife of his patron,

death. The seventeenth century witnessed a veritable explosion of Buddhist-related publications, including several editions of the Buddhist canon, over eighty Buddhist genealogical histories or “histories of the transmission of the flame [of the Dharma]” (傳燈錄 *zhuan deng lu*), and hundreds of collections of discourse records or *yulu* 語錄. A great number of the latter, including over five hundred titles not found in any other edition, were included in the *Jiaying Dazhangjing* 嘉興大藏經, published at the Lengyan Monastery 楞嚴 in Jiaying (Zhejiang province) in the late seventeenth century, with additions made through the early eighteenth century. The Jiaying canon contained expanded or previously unpublished texts from earlier periods, but the majority of the discourse records belong to Chan figures, both male and female, from the seventeenth century. Most of the references in this paper are to texts found in the Jiaying edition of the Buddhist canon. For a detailed discussion of the discourse records of women Chan masters found in the Jiaying canon, see Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008).

³ Helen Baroni, *Obaku Zen: The Emergence of the Third Sect of Zen in Tokugawa Japan*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 61.

the Lord of Kokura). In one of these, we find one of his female aristocratic patrons asking Jifei Ruyi, “How can a woman with her impurities become a Buddha?” “The lotus flower grows from the mire, is Jifei’s answer.⁴ He then brings up Lady Qinguo 秦國夫人, who had achieved enlightenment under the tutelage of the great Song-dynasty Linji Chan master Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163). Lady Qinguo eventually became one of his six female Dharma successors, and was often referred to by the great master as proof that “among women there existed great gentlemen” (*nü liu zhong you da zhangfu* 女流中有大丈夫).⁵

In referring to Lady Qinguo, Jifei was obviously drawing a potential parallel between the Song dynasty elite woman and the aristocratic Japanese female interlocutor. We do not know if this woman had expressed a desire to enter the convent and become a nun—probably not, given that she came to visit Jifei Ruyi with her son, the young prince. Nor do we know whether or not she was particularly beautiful. The point I want to make is simply that Jifei’s reliance on the much-respected Dahui Zonggao in dealing with questions of women’s religious aspirations, and in particular his utilization of the rhetoric of *da zhangfu*, was much more characteristic of Chinese monks in the Chan/Zen tradition than the one that emerges from the story of the Japanese nun Ryōnen.

This does not mean, however, that there was no problem with women seeking the spiritual attainment traditionally reserved for men. For making a woman an honorary man was not a real resolution: the gendered masculine retains its position of privilege, and the female state retains its implications of inferiority. This inherent fault line meant that women’s spiritual achievement continued to require repeated explanation and justification in the writings of Buddhists not only in the Song but through the Ming and Qing periods as well.

⁴ Jifei Ruyi, “Feng furen Naxu shi tong ci gonglang Guangzhen qing shangtang” 豐夫人那須氏同次公郎光真請上堂, in *Jifei chanshi yulu* 即非禪師語錄 *Mingban Jiaxing Da-zangjing* 明版嘉興大藏經 (hereafter referred to simply as *Jiaxing jing*), 40 vols. (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongci, 1987) vol. 38, 633b.

⁵ Dahui Zonggao, *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu* 大慧普覺禪師語錄, reprinted in Junjirō Takakusu 楠 順次郎 and Kaikyoku Watanabe 渡辺海旭, eds., *Taishō shinshō daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (hereafter referred to simply as *Taishō*) 100 vols. (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kabushiki kaisha, 1924-34), vol. 47, 872c.

In her important 1992 article “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” Miriam Levering notes that it is only with the records of the two prominent Song dynasty Chan/Zen teachers, the Linji master Dahui Zonggao and the Zaodong master Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091-1157), that we find frequent mention of the notion of religious equality.⁶ “[As regards] this matter [of enlightenment], we do not speak of male or female, of high or low, big or small. In equality, all is as if one,”⁷ Dahui tells his listeners, “This matter has nothing to do with being male or female, with being a monk or a layperson.”⁸ Levering associates the increasing use of this rhetoric of equality with the presence of a growing female audience of students and donors who “elicited from these masters an affirmation of their equal potential for enlightenment.”⁹ Dahui Zonggao, for example, had twenty-four women students, and of these, six received his official Dharma transmission, the most well-known being the nuns Miaozong 妙總 (1095-1170) and Miaodao 妙道 (exact dates unknown),¹⁰ and of course, the laywoman, Lady Qinguo (exact dates unknown). Nevertheless, while Dahui Zonggao affirms often and in no uncertain terms that realization does not hinge on whether one is a man or a woman, he also is quick to remind his listeners that it does require the heroic determination and virile spirit of a *da zhangfu* or great gentleman.¹¹ The term *da zhangfu* can be traced back as far as Mencius, and whenever it appears, is always strongly gender-marked; it “means man, a manly man.”¹² Since Mencius, the term was often used to refer to virtues or

⁶ Miriam Levering, “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” in Jose Ignacio Cabezon, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137-156; and see page 137.

⁷ Dahui Zonggao, *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu*, *Taishō* vol. 47, 909b.

⁸ Dahui Zonggao, *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu*, *Taishō* vol 47, 903c.

⁹ Levering, “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender,” 139.

¹⁰ Levering has done extensive research on both of these women. See Miriam Levering, “Miao-tao and her Teacher Ta-hui,” in Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr., eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press), 188-219; Miriam Levering, “Dōgen’s *Raihaitokusui* and Women Teaching in Sung Ch’an,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 21.1 (1998): 77-110; and Miriam Levering, “Women Ch’an Masters: The Teacher Miao-tsung as Saint” in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women Saints in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 180-204.

¹¹ Levering, “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender,” 142.

¹² Levering, “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender,” 144.

talents considered to be inherently or essentially “masculine,” be these heroic valor, extraordinary literary talent, or, in the case of Chan Buddhism, a strong and immovable determination to overcome any obstacle to the attainment of realization. Dahui Zonggao and other Buddhist writers realized, of course, that the term *da zhangfu* was strongly gendered and as such might vitiate, however unintentionally, the claim of absolute spiritual equality. As Levering points out, they tried to resolve the problem by insisting both that men had to earn the title of *da zhangfu* as much as women did, and that women who exhibited the qualities of a *da zhangfu* were to be regarded as honorary men.

According to Levering, then, the rhetoric of gender and equality in the writings of Song dynasty masters such as Dahui Zonggao reflects an unprecedented public acknowledgement of the fact that there were (and probably always had been) a significant number women who aspired to spiritual enlightenment, whether as nuns or as laywomen. The resurgence in the seventeenth century of the use of these two types of rhetoric reflects the fact that there continued to be many women interested in the religious life. It also reflects some of the other religious, cultural, and historical factors that characterized this period. Three of these factors—and there were many more—include the social upheaval of the Ming-Qing transition, which demanded and provided more opportunities for heroic behavior from both men and women; the greater numbers of educated women participating and publishing in the literary world and the accompanying public debate of the question of women’s proper role; and finally, the revival of Chan Buddhism in the early seventeenth century which, often drawing inspiration and justification from Dahui, attracted significant numbers of women—not only lay disciples and donors but Dharma heirs and religious leaders.¹³

At this point, a brief illustration of how these three factors came into play may be helpful. As Wai-ye Li points out, during the chaos and turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition period, “the favored literary

¹³) There is still a relative dearth of research on Chan Buddhism of the Ming and Qing periods. For an excellent study, however, see Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment in Dispute—The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

topos is the heroic woman whose courage, valor, or victimhood adds dignity and pathos to the cataclysmic turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century.”¹⁴ Nor must we forget that not a few of the eminent Buddhist monks of this period began life as Confucian scholars and may well have pursued traditional lives as literati-officials had not the traumatic reversals of the time made the Buddhist monastery a more attractive alternative. Thus, it is not surprising that many of these monks shared the admiration felt by the literati for women who demonstrated extraordinary loyalty to the Ming and courage in their resistance to the Qing, an appreciation that often carried over to their attitudes toward the women seeking their religious guidance.

A good example is the Linji master Baichi Xingyuan 百癡行元 (1611-62). Originally from Fujian, he had as a young man prepared assiduously for a career as a Confucian scholar-official. His father and mother died in rapid succession, and he was raised by his elder brother. He apparently failed the examinations at the age of twenty, and two years later took the tonsure. For the next several decades he studied with various teachers and finally received Dharma transmission from Feiyin Tongrong 費隱通容 (1593-1661), one of the most active figures in the revival of Linji Chan. During the 1640s he moved from place to place trying to escape the political turbulence, and finally returned to Fujian where he passed away at the relatively young age of fifty-two. He had dozens of female followers, including both laywomen and nuns.

In a commemorative text Baichi Xingyuan wrote about the wife of a certain Xu Zhangshan 徐長善, a loyalist from Haiyan 海鹽, he relates how in the autumn of 1645, the couple fled to the caves of Mount Heng to escape the Manchu invaders but were caught up in the turmoil nevertheless. Xu was killed, and his wife fought fearlessly to her death. Baichi then comments that her actions reminded him of:

those women of the past who slit their wrists [in order to preserve their virtue], whose determined virtue was as great as that of a company of soldiers. I also think of Zhang [Xun] of Weiyang of old, who when faced with danger did not

¹⁴ Wai-ye Li, “Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59 (1999):363-443; see pages 363-64.

flinch and was as ferocious as a tiger. To die for loyalty and to die for virtue are not two different things: being a wife and being a lord—[who is to say] which is easy which is difficult?¹⁵

因思昔日端臂女，一種堅貞差足伍。又思昔日張睢陽，臨危不變威如虎。
死忠死節無兩般，爲婦爲臣孰易難。

Here Baichi Xingyuan is equating male heroism—in this case, exemplified by the famous Tang dynasty hero Zhang Xun 張巡 (709-57) known for his brave defense of the city of Suiyang 睢陽 when it was attacked by the An Lushan 安祿山 rebels—with the courage of chaste women who committed suicide. The point to remember here is that the monk Baichi Xingyuan appears not to have had any difficulty transferring his admiration of Confucian exemplars of physical and moral courage to these women who demonstrated the resolute determination, the heroic spirit or *zhangfu qi* 丈夫氣, to leave the world and become monastics. In fact, Baichi Xingyuan had several women disciples of whom he speaks very highly. Of one of these, the nun Chaofang 超方, he says, “Although she belongs to the world of women, her actions are those of a man, and there is no impediment to her serving as a mirror for a thousand generations to come.”¹⁶

The second and third factors, women’s increasing literacy and their increasingly public visibility as Chan masters—both of which became the subject of intense debate—can be seen reflected in a rather vituperative essay composed by the great poet and statesman Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664), who in normal circumstances was both an advocate for women writers and a devout Buddhist layman. However, he found the increasingly popular (and in Qian’s mind indiscriminate) practice of Dharma transmissions given to women to be unacceptable, to say the least:

In these degenerate days of the Dharma, the Chan school has lost its way. Witchlike nuns and their demonic kin ascend the [Dharma] hall, preach to the congregation, and circulate their discourse records. This is all due to a generation of heterodox teachers and blind Chanists who indiscriminately bestow the seal of transmission.

¹⁵ Baichi Xingyuan, “Wan Haiyan Xu Zhangshan lingshi jielie ruren” 輓海鹽徐長善令室節烈孺人, in *Baichi chanshi yulu*, 百癡禪師語錄, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 28, 158b.

¹⁶ Baichi Xingyuan, “Shi Juyan ni Chaofang” 示俱眼尼超方, *Baichi chanshi yulu*, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 28, 94b.

Oiled heads and rouged cheeks wrangle over who will grasp the flywhisk; female untouchables are elevated to the status of lineage masters.¹⁷

頃者末法陵黎，禪門瀾倒，妖尼魔眷，上堂示眾流布語錄，皆一輩邪師瞽禪，公然印可。油頭粉面，爭拈錐拂，旃陀摩登，互作宗師。

Given this confluence of social, political and religious developments, it is not difficult to imagine why the question of what it means for a woman to be a *da zhangfu* might experience a revival. Nor is it difficult to imagine how the question might evoke very ambivalent, if not contradictory responses, such as that of Yunfu Daozhi 雲復道智 (dates unknown), a third-generation Dharma heir of Poshan Haiming 破山海明 (1597-1666) and Jifei's Dharma cousin once removed. Yunfu Daozhi tries to explain his position to a female disciple by the name of Lady Xia 夏:

This Buddhist school of ours does not speak of monks [versus] laypeople, men [versus] women.... Everyone is equal and as one. As long as you have forbearance and deep faith, and always keep in mind this [important] matter of life and death, you do not need to grieve over not having been [born] into a particular state. Although you are a woman, you have the insight of a man. Having come to me carrying incense and requesting Dharma teaching, I feel sympathy for your utmost sincerity and bestow on you the [religious] name of Miaoguo. If you engage in Buddha-recitation and religious cultivation, you will surely achieve the wondrous fruit [of realization]. If you follow this in your practice, there will come a time when with a single thought you will find yourself "home," and then you will without a doubt attain Buddhahood.

我此法門無論僧俗男女平等一如。具要當忍深信，此事生死念切，不愁不到恁麼田地。汝雖女流宛有男子之見特持片香乞法語。山僧愍其誣誠命名曰妙果益念佛修行必證妙果依此而修有時一念知歸則成佛無疑也。¹⁸

In this citation, the rhetoric of equality is again used side by side with the rhetoric of heroism: it is because of Lady Xia's great sincerity, a sincerity that reflects the spiritual insight of a man, that Yunfu Daozhi feels sympathy (although *min* 愍 can also be translated as "pity") for

¹⁷ Qian Qianyi, "Li Xiaozhen zhuan xu" 李孝貞傳序, *Muzhai youxue ji* 牧齋有學集, reprinted in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan ed., 1979), vol. 15, 135-36. The reader will note from the title of this piece that it is dedicated to a more traditional female "hero" whose heroism derived from her chastity and filial piety.

¹⁸ Yunfu Daozhi, "Shi Xia shi Miaoguo" 示夏氏妙果, *Yunfu Zhi chanshi yulu* 雲腹智禪師語錄, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 34, 559b-c.

her, and agrees to provide her the teachings that will guarantee her the realization of Buddhahood.

The purpose of this essay is not, however, to confirm the expected—the stubborn persistence of the term *da zhangfu*—but rather to show some of the various rhetorical effects to which it was put during the Ming-Qing period. As Caroline Walker Bynum has reminded us, “not only gender-related symbols but all symbols arise out of the experience of ‘gendered’ users. It is not possible ever to ask, How does a symbol—*any* symbol—mean? without asking, For whom does it mean?”¹⁹ With this advice in mind, this study will look at a small but representative range of seventeenth-century Buddhist uses of the term *da zhangfu* by both male and female Chan Buddhist teachers, as well as by Buddhist laymen and other literati. As we will see, the agendas of these Buddhists often differed, as did the ways in which they employed the rhetoric of *da zhangfu*. On the one hand, we find it used to tighten the physical and metaphysical restrictions on female spirituality, and on the other, to allow women a greater physical and metaphysical space in which to pursue their spiritual aspirations. In between these two extremes can be found a range of ambivalent and sometimes confused ideas which point to a continued awareness of, and unease about, the misfit between a universal and non-dualistic metaphysical vision of ultimate reality and the traditional gendered binary divisions and hierarchies so central to the traditional Chinese social order.

How to be Both a Great Gentleman and a Perfect Wife

From the beginning, the Buddhist laywoman—and potential patroness—presented fewer ideological problems for society than did the nun or female renunciate. In China, the religious piety of women was tolerated and even expected, as long as it did not interfere with their filial piety or the fulfillment of their prescribed household duties (nor take them out of the inner quarters where they belonged). It was also often assumed that while these women might persuade their husbands or sons to

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Introduction,” in Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman, eds. *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 2-3.

contribute financially to the support of monasteries and monks and Buddhist rituals of one sort or another, the latter acquiesced out of respect for their wives and filial piety for their mothers and not out of any personal religious conviction. What happens, however, when the husbands are themselves self-declared and committed Buddhist laymen, and so do not merely tolerate their wives' pious inclinations and activities but actively share in them? While they may occasionally have quoted the Tang dynasty poet and Buddhist layman Pang Yun 龐蘊 whose wife and daughter were as spiritually realized as the layman himself, they had too much invested in their social reputations to affirm unqualified spiritual egalitarianism with their wives. And of course, there were many Buddhist monks who were as equally invested in this traditional division of labor within the family and in the support of their male lay donors. One way they got around this rhetorical dilemma was to equate, apparently with little conscious sense of either irony or parody, the exemplary daughter/wife/mother with the *da zhangfu* or great gentleman.

One of the most illustrative examples of this strange pairing can be found in a funeral inscription and account composed by Qian Qianyi, about whom we have heard before, for the mother of an acquaintance, a certain Lady Huang. The first part of this text is taken up by an extended biographical account of Lady Huang's life, a life exemplified by meticulous filial piety: not only did she serve her stepmother and take care of her younger sisters and brothers after the early death of her mother, but also after she married, she performed *gegu* 割股 (thigh-slicing) for the health of her husband's father. She also filled all the requirements of a "wise mother": widowed when her son was only thirteen, she directed the life of her initially recalcitrant son with firmness and moral integrity.²⁰ In other words, she represented a model of female Confucian behavior not only in her proper demeanor, frugality, and simple dress, but also in her management of servants, her instruction of daughters and daughters-in-law, and so forth. She was, however, also a highly educated woman and a very pious Buddhist who had a

²⁰ Qian Qianyi, "Zhang mu Huang ruren muzhi ming" 張母黃孺人墓誌銘, in *Muzhai chuxueji* 牧齋初學集, reprinted in Shen Yunlong, 沈雲龍 ed. *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 近代中國史料叢刊, third series (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1971), vol. 85, 1441-44.

profound understanding of Mahayana Buddhist texts and imparted their wisdom to her son and in-laws. This exemplary life ended in an exemplary death, with the elderly woman calmly leaving final instructions for her family and then assuming her well-earned place in the Pure Land. Qian's response to this inspirational, albeit familiar, tale is as follows:

Women have [specific] ways of organizing their combs and hair bands, pins and lapels and tassels, and shoes of many colors; their needles and brushes, vessels and book covers are all arranged in an orderly fashion. This is equivalent to the Vinaya of the Buddha. Inasmuch as they keep around them guides and histories [written by high literati-officials who wore girdle jewels, pendant jades] and [inasmuch] as their virtue, comportment, speech, and work are manifested by means of their red brushes, this is equivalent to the teaching of the Buddha.

女子之有櫛縱笄總衿纓，箴管盤帙，具有億則，即佛氏之律也。其有左右圖史珎璜琚之順，德容言功，昭于管彤，即佛氏之教也。²¹

Qian Qianyi then makes an explicit comparison between the domestic heroism of women such as Zhang's mother with other women of his time, and in particular those Chan women who, rather than staying within the confines of the home to practice Pure Land devotions, left the household, traveled to study with eminent Chan masters, and became Dharma heirs, ascending the dais to preach:

Among the women of today are those who seek the Way of leaving the world. [Some] in seeking it cling to appearances, paying homage, reciting prayers, exhorting zealously, and distributing alms. Their mouths are like lotus flowers, but their hearts are like thorns and thistles and all of their womanly appearances are still in place, not to mention [the questions of life and death]. [Some] in seeking [the Way] shatter appearances: abandoning propriety and regulations, they plagiarize [others'] words and phrases, and plunder the expedient teaching devices of the old women [of the Chan texts] and collect together all of their words and talks: [in so doing they] go down to hell as fast as an arrow, not to mention escaping from life and death

今之女子亦間知求出世法，其執相而求之，膜拜禮誦，耑動布施。蓮花其口，柴刺其心。一切女人相宛然在也，何況生死？其破相而求之，脫落億範，剽竊文句，掠婆婆子之機逢，拾團欒之語話，此入地獄如箭射者也，何況於出生死？²²

²¹⁾ Qian Qianyi, "Zhang mu Huang ruren muzhi ming," 1443.

²²⁾ Qian Qianyi, "Zhang mu Huang ruren muzhi ming," 1443. It is important to keep in

In short, says Qian Qianyi, it is women like Lady Huang, who adhered to traditional female rules of propriety as if they were the Vinaya or Buddhist monastic code itself who are the only ones qualified to serve as role models, not only for other women, but for men as well. It is by religiously fulfilling her domestic duties that a woman can earn the title of “great gentleman.”

This conflation of female domestic virtue with spiritual achievement, as paradoxical as it may seem at first glance, makes more sense when one considers the original source of the term *da zhangfu* in *Mencius*:

Qin Chun (Ching Ch'un) said to Mencius, “Are not Kongsun Yan (Kung-sun Yen) and Zhang Yi (Chang I) really great men? Let them once be angry, and all the princes are afraid. Let them live quietly, and the flames of trouble are extinguished throughout the kingdom.” Mencius said, “How can such men be great men? Have you not read the *Ritual Usages*? At the capping of a young man, his father admonishes him. At the marrying away of a young woman, her mother admonishes her, accompanying her to the door on her leaving, and cautioning her with these words, ‘You are going to your home. You must be respectful; you must be careful. Do not disobey your husband.’ Thus, to look upon compliance as their correct course is the rule for women.”

“To dwell in the wide house of the world, to stand in the correct seat of the world, and to walk in the great path of the world; when he obtains his desire for office, to practice his principles for the good of the people; and when that desire is disappointed, to practice them alone; to be above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend—these characteristics constitute the great man.”

景春曰：「公孫衍、張儀豈不誠大 丈夫哉？一怒而諸侯懼，安居而天下熄。」孟子曰：「是焉得爲大丈夫乎？子未學禮乎？丈夫之冠也，父命之；女子之嫁也，母命之，往送之門，戒之曰：『往之女 家，必敬必戒，無違夫子。』以順爲正者，妾婦之道也。居天下之廣居，立天下之正位，行天下之大道；得志與民由之，不得志，獨行其道；富貴不能淫，貧賤不能移，威武不能屈—此之謂大丈夫。²³

mind, however, that Qian's diatribe against these religious women who publicly engage in Chan debate and abandon their household duties—and there are many other instances of this in his writings—reflects a related polemic agenda, in this case, a reaction to the emergence of Linji Chan teachers who, unlike the so-called Great Masters of the Ming such as Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535-1615), were far too antinomian for Qian Qianyi's religious taste.

²³) James Legge, tr. *The Works of Mencius*, in *The Chinese Classics*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), vol. 2, 264-65.

Although Mencius does not explicitly equate the two, the juxtaposition of the description of the great man who maintains his integrity and moral principle, whether or not he is recognized in the world, with the traditional description of a woman who meticulously fulfills her duties as a wife and daughter-in-law, may well have been later regarded as a justification for their conflation.

During the Ming-Qing period, a time when the Dharma did indeed appear to be in a state of disciplinary decay, and the world itself caught up in chaos and turmoil, not only did women assume the qualities of *da zhangfu*, through their heroic and righteous behavior but also, by the same token, men failed to live up to the standards set by Mencius and thus did not merit the title of *da zhangfu*. A good example of this phenomenon in Buddhist circles can be found in the discourse records of the Caodong monk Hongzan Zaican 弘贊在搵 (1611-81). Originally from Guangzhou 廣州, Hongzan started out as a Confucian scholar but after the fall of the Ming decided to become a Buddhist monk instead. He left Guangzhou and studied with well-known masters in the Jiangnan area, where he received Dharma transmission from Xueguan Zhiyin 雪觀智闇 (1585-1637) who was then living in Hangzhou. Hongzan then returned to the south where he served as the abbot of a number of temples and acquired a reputation for his teachings on the importance of discipline. In fact, his lineage, which includes the eminent Zaodong master Wuyi Yuanlai 無異元來 (1575-1630), advocated a parallel emphasis on Chan meditation on the one hand, and discipline, sutra study, and Pure Land devotional practice on the other. Hongzan's early Confucian training coupled with the strong emphasis on religious discipline is reflected in his use of the rhetoric of heroism.

Hongzan Zaican was well aware of the original meaning of the term *zhangfu* as used in Mencius. In a Dharma talk, he explicitly remarks on the deeper meaning of the term:

... then there is the matter of shaving off the hair but leaving the whiskers. It is said that to shave the hair is to get rid of one's *kleshas* (worldly afflictions), but to leave one's whiskers is to retain one's [identity as] a man (*zhangfu* 丈夫). This is false. If hair can be said to be equivalent to the *kleshas*, how much more so are whiskers! Now, that which Mencius called a *zhangfu* was based solely on [the ability] to exhaust human-heartedness (仁 *ren*) and to completely master both

life and death. Zhang Liang's²⁴ looked like a woman [because of his long hair], but in his heart he was more courageous than ten thousand men.

復有剃髮不剃鬚者。駕言削髮除煩惱，留鬚表丈夫。此訛也，髮云煩惱則鬚之煩惱尤甚。鬚表丈夫，則孟子所稱丈夫者，乃在窮仁疑真，窮達一死生而已。張良壯貌如婦人女子而心雄萬父夫。²⁵

Hongzan refers to Mencius yet again in a formal instruction to his male disciples in which he laments the fact that nowadays it is only women who have the stamina to carry out the ritual practice of fasting (*zhai* 齋), a practice which, he says, was traditionally reserved for men. Ultimately, his goal is not to praise the women but to berate the men:

Fasting (*zhai*) is a skill [predicated on] humanity (*ren*) and [was meant to] be studied by great men: it [was not meant to be the] the affair of women and girls. Nowadays, men indulge themselves in feeding the mouth and belly and hate to speak of fasting. Now the [principle] of not indulging in one's desire to fill one's mouth and belly is something the Confucian training has addressed in detail. Confucius said, "A scholar, whose mind is set on truth, and who is ashamed of bad clothes and bad food, is not fit to be discoursed with."²⁶ And Mencius said: "A man who only eats and drinks is counted mean by others;—because he nourishes what is little to the neglect of what is great."

乃仁術也。大人君子之學。非婦人女子之事也。今人侈口腹之欲，而惡言齋。夫口腹之欲不可縱意孔門順之詳矣。孔子曰：士志于道而恥惡衣惡食者，未足與議也。孟子曰飲食之人則人賤之矣。²⁷

Hongzan then goes on to remind his listeners of the description from the Great Learning about how the sages of old fasted and bathed in order to make themselves fit to study the ways of Heaven. How then, he argues, could it be that fasting, in Buddhism as well as in Confucianism, was not a practice reserved for men? If nowadays fasting was considered to be "women's work," it was simply a confirmation of how topsy-turvy the times have become:

²⁴) Zhang Liang was a Warring States hero who came from a long line of officials from the state of Han. After an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Qin emperor, he fled and ultimately joined forces with Liu Bang 劉邦 and assisted him in vanquishing the Qin and establishing the Han dynasty.

²⁵) Hongzan Zaican, *Muren shenggao* 木人生稿, *Jiaxing jing*, vol. 35, 458a.

²⁶) James Legge, tr., *The Confucian Analects*, in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, 168.

²⁷) James Legge, tr., *The Works of Mencius*, vol.2, p. 417.

I am ashamed at how many men (*zhangfu*) today do not measure up to women. Why is this? The reason why women are able to fast is that they are able to practice the art of humanity; the reason why men are unable to fast is that they lack the art of humanity.”

吾愧今之丈夫不及女子之者多矣，何也？女子能齋是能操術於仁，男子不能齋，是乃絕術於仁。²⁸

Hongzan's keen, and largely Confucianized, sense of the proper religious division of labor between men and women can be seen even more clearly in a letter we find in his discourse records that is addressed to the wife of Vice Minister of Personnel (Junior Steward) Yan from Hongxi (洪西巖少宰夫人), who, judging by her religious name, Xuxian daoren 虛賢道人, may have been as much interested in Daoist as in Buddhist cultivation. In this letter, Hongzan sets out to convince her that by staying home and carrying out her household duties she can best fulfill both her aspiration to understand “the great matter of life and death,” and the Mahayana Buddhist imperative to work for the liberation of all sentient beings rather than just oneself:

A woman who [has a female body] and yet has the determination to investigate deeply in hopes of fully understanding the great matter of life and death can be said to possess completely the wisdom of a man (*zhangfu*). The Lady's determination to investigate and study the [matter of] life and death is to study the Way. [Both] those who study the Way and those who study [both] Buddhism and Daoism take the task of liberating sentient beings as their mission, but to liberate sentient beings one does not need to discard that which is near and seek out that which is distant. Those who encircle and face the Lady's body—husband, sons, daughters, and maidservants—are all sentient beings. To serve one's husband with respect and to not do anything to cause him to become enraged is the same as liberating the sentient being that is your husband. To instruct one's children in righteousness and not to do anything which will encourage their ignorant mind is the same as liberating the sentient beings that are one's sons and daughters. To manage her underlings with benevolence and to not cause them to complain or feel resentment is the same as liberating the sentient beings that are servants and maidservants. When it comes to adorning oneself both within and without, to not show off one's women's clothing and other accessories in the central hall, and in so doing move those who come to visit to respect their fathers and sons just as one would respect one's own family, is equivalent to liberating the sentient beings who come from outside. If one discards sentient beings and does not liberate them and

²⁸) Hongzan Zaican, “Shi chizhai,” 示持齋, *Muren shenggao, Jiaxing jing*, vol. 35, 479c.

seeks to investigate and study [the great matter] of life and death, this is then to know the head but not to know the tail. ...

夫人以女身而志參究,期了生死大事,可謂具丈夫智矣。又知先前身子安頓無處,但說諸法空爲不濟事可謂具丈夫智之聰慧者矣,參究若不實實得此身子有箇放下處說有悟門果是假話。夫人既具此見不愁他日得悟。不真實也,但時時提句誰字話頭捱擄將去。有日將他挨倒自得真實悟門。自得身子放下處。今當說者,夫人志參究了生死者爲學道也。學道者,學佛者,佛何道度眾生爲事,度眾生不必捨近求遠,環對夫人之身。丈夫兒女婢僕之屬,即眾生也。事夫以敬勿有以發其瞋心即是度丈夫之眾生也,教子以義勿有以長其癡性即是度男女之眾生也。御下以恩勿有以起怨恨即是度僕婢之眾生也。至于嚴內外婦人衣裾之物不暴露中堂,令往來者服我夫子齊家之有教即是度外來之眾生也。若捨眾生不度而求參究了生死,此便是知頭不...²⁹

This elevation of the life of domesticity over that of renunciation is deeply Confucian but by no means particular to China. One cannot help but think of Martin Luther who in his impassioned tract entitled *The Estate of Marriage* (1552) wrote:

A wife too should regard her duties in the same light, as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways; and as she busies herself with other duties and renders help and obedience to her husband. These are truly golden and noble works.... If you were not a woman you should now wish to be one for the sake of this very work alone, that you might thus gloriously suffer and even die in the performance of God's work and will.³⁰

Lest we assume this to be a purely male construct, it is important to note that the same sort of rhetoric can be found in the discourse records of seventeenth century women Chan masters when addressing their lay disciples, whether male or female. The woman Linji Chan Master Qiyuan Xinggang 祇園行剛 (1597-1654), for example, in a letter to a local literati-official known for his poetry and gardens, cautions him not to become distracted by the “sea of prose and the river of poetry” (*wenhai shijiang* 文海詩江), and to maintain his religious practice so that he may be worthy of being considered “a great gentlemen who

²⁹) Hongzan Zaican, “Yu Xuxian daoren” 與虛賢道人, *Muren shenggao, Jiaxing jing*, vol. 35, 489b-c.

³⁰) Quoted in Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds., *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 159.

lives within the world even as he has [spiritually] renounced it” 可爲居塵出塵之大丈夫.³¹ She also urges her female followers to become “women gentlemen [living in freedom] in the burning house and the dusty prison.”³² However, it is important to note in the discourse records of women masters addressed to women, it is rarely if ever the religious fulfillment of one’s feminine duties that in and of itself leads to spiritual achievement, but rather the single-minded practice of *huatou* 話頭 investigation in the midst of the most mundane of household activities.³³

Nor was this new: Dahui himself had often advocated this parallel practice of *huatou* investigation and household duties in his sermons to his lay followers. Qiyuan Xinggang addresses a laywoman as follows:

I teach people to investigate and study their *huatou* and to profoundly foster the feeling of doubt, never forgetting it moment after moment, and not be blinded by everything: in the midst of leisure and business, activity and quiescence, calling the maids and ordering the servants, cradling the baby boy and playing with the baby girl, and receiving and taking care of guests, you must forcibly foster this feeling of doubt about “What, in the end, is my original face?” For the twelve periods of the day, the doubt comes and the doubt goes until suddenly you will break through the *huatou*, and you will understand how it is that from the start, you and the Buddhas and Patriarchs have been breathing out of the same nostrils. Then you will truly be a woman gentleman (*nü zhangfu* 女丈夫) within the burning house and the dusty toiling world.

山僧教人參究看話頭深下疑情念念不瞋。一切閒忙動靜呼奴使婢抱兒弄女應酬之中，重下疑情畢竟如何是我本來面目。二六十之時，疑來疑去，忽然疑破話頭困元來於佛祖同鼻孔出氣。誠爲火宅塵勞中女丈夫。³⁴

Another possibility available to a pious laywoman was the mental independence and religious freedom that a woman could enjoy without

³¹ Qiyuan Xinggang, “Fu Zheng jushi” 復鄭居士, *Fushi Qiyuan chanshi yulu* 伏獅祇園禪師語錄, *Jiaxing jing*, vol. 28, 430c. For a detailed study of Qiyuan Xinggang, see my *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China*, esp. Chapters Three and Four.

³² Qiyuan Xinggang, “Shi Ruizong” 示瑞宗, *Fushi Qiyuan chanshi yulu*, 430b.

³³ *Huatou* investigation refers to the practice of intensive meditation on a particular phrase or word, such as “Who is the one who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” or, simply, “Who?”

³⁴ Qiyuan Xinggang, “Shi Ruizong,” *Fushi Qiyuan chanshi yulu*, 430b

actually leaving the moral and personal security of the inner chambers. This can be compared to the view of some male literati that the inner purity and spontaneous feeling of literary women was such that, unlike male writers, they did not need to travel widely and gain extensive experience of the world in order to write convincingly of this world. Thus Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574-1624) writes, in the preface to the *Mingyuan shigui* 名媛詩歸 (Selection of poetry by famous women), an anthology of women's writing he is said to have edited, that although men still had to travel widely and have a personal experience of the world in order to write or paint, women are different: "Lying in their beds, they can see villages and districts, and in their dreams they can visit the border passes. This is all because of their purity" 衾枕間有鄉縣，夢間有關塞。惟清故。³⁵

The following inscription was written for the portrait of a certain Lady Gu 顧 by the seventeenth-century Linji Chan monk Yinyin Faxin 音印法璽 (exact dates unknown). This piece, composed at the request of Lady Gu's son, it might be considered a religious parallel to Zhong Xing's notion of the type of "armchair travel" suitable for women:

This Lady never in her entire life left the inner chambers or crossed over the boundaries of the home. Her virtue and chastity were famous throughout the region, and her pure actions were completely accomplished. It is only today [in this portrait?] that she has come out to [sit] in the woody marshes below the mountain boulders to listen to the pure flowing [of the Dharma river] in the country of Nonexistence and to gaze at the mountain flowers in the vast and boundless wilderness. Tell me, is she a man? Or is she a woman?

者孺人生平不出閨閣，不越戶限。貞節名于邦邑行潔于已窮。祇今向山石下林藪間聽清流于無有之鄉，看山花于廣漠之野。你道他是男耶女耶？³⁶

As it turns out, however, Master Yinyin Faxin's purpose is not primarily to assert that women can attain religious transcendence within the

³⁵ Zhong Xing, *Mingyuan shigui* 名媛詩歸, 4b-5a, cited in Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 883. See also Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Women Writers of Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Asia Center, 2004), 352.)

³⁶ Yinyin Faxi, "Xu Xiru jushi wei mu Gushi ruren qing zan" 徐熙如居士為母顧氏孺人請贊, *Lengyan Faxi Yin chanshi yulu* 楞嚴法璽印禪師語錄, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 28, 834.

home, but rather to provide both Lady Gu's son (and by extension, his own male followers) with a lesson on nonduality. Thus, after posing the question of Lady Gu's gender, he challenges the son to provide him with an answer, promising that if he is able to answer it successfully, the monk will be happy to write the inscription for the portrait. If he is not successful, however, then Master Yinyin Faxin will ask the son to:

first try to draw your own face that existed before your mother was born. Only then will you begin to understand that there is neither male nor female, nor is there delight and anger, grief and joy, [only] then will your esteemed mother enjoy the great benefits you wish for her.

須向父母未生以前摸者自己面目，始知非男非女亦非喜怒哀樂，公欲令堂方得一大受用也。³⁷

Here of course we find not so much the rhetoric of heroism or equality, but rather of nonduality, the universal spiritual ideal that is beyond not only male and female but also all other dichotomous binaries. However, the message that Yinyin Faxin conveys is a double one: it is the purity of an exemplary woman who remained within the confines of the inner chambers that made it possible for her to roam the metaphysical vastness of the 'Country of Nonexistence'.

Leaving Home Requires the Courage and Heroism of a Man

With the increasing perception of the decay of institutional Dharma and parallel emphasis on lay Buddhist piety characteristic of the Ming-Qing period, leaving the world did not necessarily literally require abandoning family and home. As we have seen, there were many who argued forcefully that it was far preferable not to do so, especially if one was a woman. Nevertheless, there were both many men and women who did in fact make the decision to leave the world and take the tonsure. For a man, and even more especially for a woman, to leave behind the affective world of family and children was considered by many to require the determination and fortitude of a *da zhangfu*. Thus

³⁷ Yinyin Faxin, "Xu Xiru jushi wei mu Gushi ruren qing zan," 834.

we find Jiwei Xingzhou 介爲行舟 (1611-70), a Linji monk who had many women disciples, writing to a nun named Dingyuan 丁遠 that: “To leave the household life (*chujia* 出家) is something that only great gentlemen can do. Given that you have left the household, you may be called a gentleman among women” 出家乃大丈夫之所爲，汝既出家可謂女中丈夫。³⁸ However, the old anxieties about the transgression of traditional gender boundaries persisted even among those who had renounced the world. The anxiety and ambivalence on the part of Buddhist monks can be seen with exemplary clarity in the following Dharma talk from the recorded sayings of the Caodong monk Shiyu Mingfang 石雨明方 (1593-1648). Shiyu Mingfang, a native of Jiaying 嘉興, had married at his father’s command at the age of eighteen. However, when his father died four years later, he immediately left home and became a monk, ultimately receiving Dharma transmission from the eminent Caodong master Zhanran Yuancheng 湛然圓澄 (1561-1626). The following sermon was delivered to the “great assembly,” which may or may not have included women—there is no indication that it did.

I do not know the locus classicus of the saying “the Great Way does not have the appearance of male and female.” There is one positive thing about these words and one negative thing. If one [speaks in terms] of the World-Honored One preaching the Dharma to monks, nuns, laywomen, and laymen, the four classes [of followers] have the same karmic destiny and belong to the same community.... The monks exhaust the study of the monks, the nuns exhaust the discipline of the nuns, and they [both] assist in the turning of the Dharma wheel, and in their understanding there is no difference in what they say. This is the one positive thing

示眾大道無男女像，不知出何教典。此語有一利一害，如世尊說法有比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷，四眾人等同緣共會和光相集。僧盡僧學，尼盡尼戒，助轉法輪了無異說，此一利也³⁹

In this opening passage, Shiyu Mingfang acknowledges the spiritual equality of all of the four classes of Buddhist followers and in particular

³⁸) Jiwei Xingzhou, “Shi Dingyuan ni” 示丁遠尼, *Weizhou chanshi yulu* 爲舟禪師語錄, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 28, 267c-268a.

³⁹) Shiyu Mingfang, “Shi zhong” 示眾, *Shiyu chanshi fatan* 石雨禪師法壇, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 27, 112a-b.

that of monks and nuns—although one cannot help but note that the monks devote themselves to study while the nuns devote themselves to discipline; the subtext may well be that monks (males) are more suited to the use of the mind and nuns (women) to the discipline of the body. But he has made the necessary acknowledgment that women are not necessarily spiritually inferior to men. It is, however, the one negative thing that more seriously concerns Shiyu Mingfang:

If monks and nuns mingle indiscriminately, they will damage the teachings and destroy the [Confucian] social rules: this is the one negative thing. When common folk hear this talk about the Dharma preaching equality and rejecting hierarchical division of high and low, and that it does not advocate the hierarchy of high and low, then nobles will [have no motivation] to fulfill their nobility, subjects to fulfill their subjecthood, fathers to fulfill their fatherhood, sons to fulfill their sonhood, masters to fulfill their masterhood, servants to fulfill their servanthood. It will even reach the point where men will bear no resemblance to men and women will bear no resemblance to women. This stirring up of confusion in the world is the result of misunderstanding the teaching of the Buddha and not having grasped the way of principle. In fact those who think that [Buddhism] is special in this regard do not understand the Buddha's greater meaning. [He] wanted all nobles to be nobles, subjects to be subjects, fathers to be fathers, sons to be sons, masters to be masters, servants to be servants, men to be men, and women to be women: [this is] not to be changed and not to be transgressed; this is what is called the natural equality.

若僧尼混雜懷教敗倫，此益害也。有益等俗人聞得是法平等無有高下知說說便君不成君，臣不成臣，父不成父，子不成子，主不成主，僕不成僕，乃至男不像男，女不像女，攪亂世間皆因錯會佛語不通理路。一至如是殊不知世尊大意。要汝君君臣臣父父子子主是主僕是僕男是男女是女，不得動者不得違，曰自然平等。⁴⁰

The monk Shiyu Mingfang's profound anxiety over having nuns and monks intermingling—the Buddhist version of the Confucian anxiety of having men and women intermingle and thus transgressing the traditional boundaries of inner and outer—can be found elsewhere in his discourse records as well. In a Dharma talk he says:

Those who are meant to obtain liberation in the body of a *bhikṣu* (monk) will necessarily take the body of a *bhikṣu*, in order to preach the Dharma. Those who

⁴⁰ Shiyu Mingfang, "Shi zhong," *Shiyu chanshi fatan*, 112b.

are meant to obtain liberation in the body of a *bhikṣuṇī* (nun) will necessarily take the body of a *bhikṣuṇī*. It is proper that when a preaches the Dharma, there should not be a single in the assembly; it is proper that when a *bhikṣuṇī* preaches the Dharma, there should not be a single *bhikṣu* [in the assembly].

應宜比丘身得度者即現比丘身而爲說法，應以比丘尼身得度者即現比丘尼身而爲說法。正當比丘說法時眾中無有一比丘尼者。正當比丘尼說法時眾眾無有一比丘者。⁴¹

In another Dharma talk, this one delivered at a certain Qinghe Convent 清河庵 (one wonders if he has excepted himself from the general rule that male monastics should not preach to female monastics), he asks: “Qinghe Convent is a monastery for women; you have all probably heard it said that the Great Way is not divided into male and female. Why then are there divisions between men’s and women’s communities? “大眾從來說大道 不分男女相，爲甚麼分男女會?”⁴² Mingfang Shiyu does not really answer the question directly. However, he does bring up the familiar story of Sariputra and the Moon Goddess from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, but this time presumably in order to show that while there is clearly no gendered essence, neither is there any need to change into a man.⁴³ Most of all, he is using the Mahayana Buddhist rhetoric of equality to argue against women’s assumption of traditional social male roles. We see this in the continuation of the Dharma talk that we referred to earlier, where Shiyu Mingfang draws on an often retold and reinterpreted story of the nun Utpalavarṇā. We find this story recorded early on by the well-known pilgrim monk Faxian 法賢 (ca. 337-ca. 422). According to this version, Utpalavarṇā vowed to be the first to

⁴¹) Shiyu Mingfang, “Shangtang” 上堂 *Shiyu chanshi fatan*, 105b.

⁴²) Shiyu Mingfang, “Qinghe An shang tang” 清河庵上堂, *Shiyu chanshi fatan*, 101c.

⁴³) In this famous section (found in Chapter 6) of the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, the learned but rather pompous monk Sariputra meets a goddess with whom he engages in discussion about the meaning of emptiness. At one point, Sariputra challenges the goddess to change her form into that of man, to which she replies that she has been seeking her form for many years without success (not surprising, given that according to the Mahayana Buddhist notion of emptiness, there is no inherently existing “male” or “female” form). She then turns the tables on Sariputra and demands that he exhibit his powers and transform himself into a woman. When he is unable to do so, the goddess does it for him. When the distraught Sariputra finds himself in a female body, the goddess takes pity on him and restores him to his original form. Ultimately, Sariputra comes to understand that, like an illusion created by a magician, male and female forms are just a matter of appearance, and have no inherent reality.

see the Buddha upon his descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven, where he had spent the three-month rainy season there preaching to his mother. Because of her lowly status as a woman, she was forced to remain in the back of the crowd who had gathered to welcome his return. But, because of her great accumulated merit, she was able to transform herself not only into a man, but also into a *cakravartin* or universal monarch. She then had no problem making her way to the front of the crowd, where the Buddha transformed her back into a woman and predicted her future enlightenment.⁴⁴

As Serinity Young notes, this story caused great problems to later Buddhist male authors, whether Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, or Japanese.⁴⁵ Although the story does not appear in Pali versions of the Buddha's descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven, early commentary on the *Therīgāthā* speaks of Utpalavarṇā's powers of transformation, and one of the four poems attributed to her makes specific reference to her transformation into a *cakravartin* or universal ruler. More troubling is the elaboration of this tale in the *Therīgāthā* which claims that Utpalavarṇā had originally been a courtesan who had committed incest. The Japanese Zen Master Dogen 道元 (1200-53) tries to attenuate this aspersion on her character by having Utpalavarṇā retell the story of how in a previous existence when she was a courtesan, not only had she broken the precepts, but she had also put on a nun's robe as a joke. Dogen then explains that although she had to pay for her misdemeanors with a stint in hell, eventually she was born again into the human world. Then, because of the merit of having donned a nun's robe, albeit in jest, she was able to learn about the Dharma, become a nun, and ultimately become enlightened and acquire the powers that allowed her to move to the front of the assembly and welcome the Buddha.⁴⁶

There are several different Chinese versions of this story, many of which portray Utpalavarṇā in a fairly negative light. In one of these, she is said not to have actually become a *chakravartin* through the power of her accumulated merit, but rather to have disguised herself

⁴⁴ *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* 高僧法顯傳, *Taishō*, vol. 51, 859c-869c.

⁴⁵ Serinity Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: Sexualities in Buddhist Narrative, Iconography, and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 192-94.

⁴⁶ See Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhist Approaches to Sexuality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 158.

as one in order to greet the Buddha, after which she returned back to her place and to her normal form. According to this version, although the Buddha did praise her, everyone else was upset by her actions.⁴⁷ In another version, the version Shiyu Mingfang alludes to, Utpalavarṇā does in fact transform herself into a man by means of her acquired powers and position herself in front of the assembly of monks. However, instead of acknowledging her spiritual merit, the Buddha actually scolds her, saying, “How did you manage to leap over the *mahasangha* [great assembly of monks]? Although you have managed to see my flesh body, you have not seen my Dharma body.” In other words, while she may have had spiritual powers, she lacked spiritual insight. His praise is reserved rather for the monk Subhūti, who, understanding that to see the Dharma is to see the Buddha, has not even attended the assembly but stayed behind meditating. While the overall message may well be that one does not need to see the Buddha physically in order to realize the Dharma, the subtext—that nuns should remain in their place, that is to say, behind and separated from the monks—is unmistakable. It is important to note, however, that the main criticism of Utpalavarṇā is not that she was transformed into a man, but that she did so under false pretenses rather than true spiritual accomplishment.⁴⁸

Mingfang Shiyu’s Dharma talk does not end here, however. It is an indication of the profound ambivalence felt by these Buddhist men that he turns from his disparagement of the Indian nun Utpalavarṇā

⁴⁷ This version can be found in the Ekottarāgama (*Zeng yi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經), translated into Chinese by Gautama Samghadeva (ca. 383-97). See Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 136-39. There is also a Beijing opera based on the story of Utpalavarṇā, entitled *Lifo ji* 禮佛記, as well as other popular elaborations. See Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, “Lianhuaseni chujia yinyuan ba” 蓮花色尼出家因緣跋, first printed in *Qinghua xuebao* 清華學報 7:2 (1932) then reprinted in Chen’s *Hanliu tang ji* 寒柳堂集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 151-156.

⁴⁸ In fact, the Qing Caodong master Jinshi Zhangui 今釋澹歸 (1614-80) from Hangzhou, in a Dharma talk delivered on the occasion of tonsuring a group of women, mentions Utpalavarṇā, along with Mahaprajapati (大愛道尼) and Yasodharā (耶輸陀羅尼) as being one of the most important of the Buddha’s numerous early female disciples in India, whose example was followed in China by the nun Moshan Liaoran 末山了然 in the Tang and the nun Miaozong in the Song. All of these women, urges Jinshi Zhangui, should serve as important models for the good women who have not come to him requesting tonsure. See Jinshi Zhangui, “Du ni shannü ren” 度尼善女人, *Danxia Zhangui chanshi yulu* 丹霞澹歸禪師語錄 *Jiaying jing*, vol. 38, 298b.

to an elevation of a more recent Chinese nun: Miaozong, the Dharma heir of Dahui Zonggao, the Song master who so forcefully reminded his followers that the Dharma was not divided into male and female. Mingfang seems to admit that Miaozong can be considered to be an exception to the rule that nuns should focus on discipline and leave the teaching to the monks. In fact, he goes so far as to quote from one of her sermons for the edification of what I am assuming was a primarily male congregation of disciples:

One can also say that in the Chan school there have been those [women] who are exceptions to the rule. An example is the nun Miaozong who, because she went to study [with Dahui] and attained enlightenment, was asked by the governor [of Pingqiang prefecture, Jiangsu province] Zhang [Anguo] to become the abbess of the Cishou Chan nunnery. In her installation sermon she said: “Since the time [the Buddha] transmitted the Four Noble Truths in the Deer Park, the Dharma Wheel has been liberating the myriads of sentient beings. Today together with the Buddhas and the Patriarchs of both this world and other directions, with the mountains and the rivers, and the vast earth, the grasses and trees and the dense forests, I turn the wheel of the Dharma. If there is a single stalk of grass or a single tree that does not turn the wheel of the Dharma, then it cannot be called turning the wheel of the Dharma.

若論宗門 會下別有出格一路，如妙總尼，因參訪得悟後爲郡守張公請住資壽禪寺，開堂曰：始從鹿野苑轉四諦法輪。度百千萬眾，山僧今日與此界他方，乃佛乃祖，山河大地，草木叢林，共轉大法輪。若一草一木不轉法輪則不得名爲轉法輪。⁴⁹

In his quotation from Miaozong's longer sermon, Mingfang has left out a few key words without which it can be read differently. In this passage, it sounds as though Miaozong were claiming that she as teacher is the one who is turning the wheel of the Dharma together with the Buddhas and Patriarchs, as well as the grasses and the trees, mountains and rivers. In the original, however, she includes her audience as well, presenting a vision of interconnectedness rather than setting herself up as the sole teacher and authority:

Today together with the Buddhas and the Patriarchs of both this world and other directions, with the mountains and the rivers, and the vast earth, the grasses and

⁴⁹ Shiyu Mingfang, “Shi zhong” 示眾, *Shiyu Chanshi fatan*, pp. 112 a-b.

trees and the dense forests, the four classes of Buddhist followers right here before me: each of us turns the wheel of the Dharma [reflecting] each others' brightness like an interconnected web. If there is a single stalk of grass or a single tree that does not turn the wheel of the Dharma, then [what I do] cannot be called turning the wheel of the Dharma.

山僧今日與此界他方，乃佛乃祖，山河大地，草木叢林，現前四眾，各轉大法輪。交光相羅。若一草一木不轉法轉，則不得名為轉法輪。⁵⁰

Shiyu Mingfang's personal response to Miaozong's words is ambivalent, to say the least. On the one hand, he expresses doubts as to the "old nun's" qualifications for opening her big mouth. And yet, he admits to having mulled over her words for more than thirty years:

What do you say, great assembly: what principle has this old nun attained that she [dares] open her big mouth? Although I have had my doubts, I have harbored it in my chest for over thirty years and have never before mentioned it. Today I want to hear the great assembly, all the way from the Buddhas and the Patriarchs down to the single stalk of grass and the single tree together turn the wheel of the Dharma. I do not know who among those listening can look into this.

大眾且道者老尼得個甚麼道理，便解開此大口。雖然有疑處，山僧蘊於胸中三十餘年，不曾舉者。今日要聞大眾即是乃佛乃祖，至於一草一木共轉法輪。不知聽者是誰參。⁵¹

In any case, as the oft-cited stories of the Dragon King's daughter in the *Lotus Sutra* and the Flower-Scattering Goddess in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* testify, spiritual attainment was perhaps best demonstrated by the ability to transform oneself into a man. Moreover, it was commonly assumed by many Buddhist monastics that for a woman, becoming a nun meant abandoning one's female gendered identity and assuming a male one as instantaneously as the Dragon King's daughter transformed herself into a man. In a Dharma talk delivered at the request of a woman who had just taken the tonsure, the Linji monk Xingkong Xingzhen 性空行臻 (1608-78) says: "To discard the white [clothes of laywoman] and don the black [robes of a nun] and distance oneself from the world's dust [means that] although you are a woman you have the body (*shen* 身) of a man ... [and you can be said to be]

⁵⁰) This passage is contained in the *Wudeng quanshu* 五燈全書, reprinted in *Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō* 大日本續藏經. 90 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975-1989), vol. 41, 16a.

⁵¹) Shiyu Mingfang, "Shi zhong" 示眾, *Shiyu Chanshi fatan*, 112b.

breathing through the same nostrils of the Dragon King's Daughter from the Lotus [Sutra] assembly who in a split second transformed herself into a man.” 脫白披緇遠世塵，女中卻有丈夫身 與法華會上龍女一鼻孔出氣，忽然之間變成男子。⁵²

There is No Difference Between Male and Female, Householder and Renunciate

Shiyu Mingfang's ambivalence can be compared with the more articulate expression of the fluidity and ultimate emptiness of dualist labels such as man and woman, layperson and monastic that we find in the Dharma talks of another Caodong monk (and ardent Ming loyalist) from Guangdong, Hanke Zuxin 函可祖心 (1611-59). In this talk, he, like others before him, attempts to demonstrate that the real meaning of being a monk or a layperson, a woman or a man, depends on one's motivations rather than on one's physical appearance:

Leaving the householder's life and remaining in the world, if one looks in terms of its truth and authenticity, are completely the same. A renunciate [someone who has left home] who is unable to see through [the illusion of] labels is nothing more than a renunciate who [in fact is still a] layman [someone still at home]. A layperson who is able to see through [the illusion] of labels is [in fact] a renunciate although he or she lives as a layperson. A man who is unable to see through [the illusion of] labels is [in fact] a woman who happens to sport mustache and beard. A woman who is able to see through [the illusion] of labels is [in fact] a miniature man with a mustache and beard.

世出世間若見期真實一切無差別。若是出家底，識不得破名為在家出家。若是男子識不得破名，為戴鬚眉底女人。若是女人識得破名，為少鬚眉底男子。⁵³

Hanke does not avoid assuming an essential “female” and “male” personality or psychology (and in the process privileging one over the other, the renunciate superior to the non-renunciate, the male determination superior to the female passivity), but he does argue that these labels are not inextricably connected to biology but rather they are mental constructions.

⁵²) Xingkong Xingzhen, *Xingkong Zhen Chanshi yulu* 性空臻禪師語錄 *Jiaying jing*, vol. 39, 755a.

⁵³) Hanke Zuxin, “Shang tang” 上堂, *Qianshan Shengren yulu* 千山剩人語錄, *Jiaying jing*, vol. 38, 213c.

It is only those of you who have not seen through the [illusion] of labels that make all different sorts of distinctions such as “you are a layperson,” “I am a renunciate,” “you are a man,” “I am a woman,” “you are a woman,” “I am a man.” It is this mind that makes distinctions that is the root and the source of the endless kalpas of life and death through the six realms. If you view [things] with eyes [that see from the perspective of the truth of [who you are] before your mother and father were born, then how could there be such distinctions such as renunciate and layperson, male and female?

祇爲你等識不得破，便道你是在家，我是出家，你是出家，我是在家，你是男子，我是女人，你是女人，我是男子，種種分別底。此分別心便是你生死根源百千生輪回六道。⁵⁴

After having argued that distinctions are made by the dualistic mind, Hanke then goes on to note that only one who has seen the emptiness of such dualism can understand that each person or type of person is who they are naturally, and this does not need to be otherwise. Here Hanke very explicitly rejects the assumption that women need to become transformed into men in order to realize Buddhahood:

Only when one acquires a true and authentic view that does not see any such distinctions, then and only then will a renunciate be allowed to become renunciate, will a layperson be allowed to be a layperson, will a man naturally be a man, will a woman naturally be a woman, each and every one of them naturally manifesting themselves without the slightest need to move or change even a hair. You do not need to talk about women who, because of the five obstacles, have in the end hope to be transformed into a man's body before they will be able to realize Buddhahood. The way this mountain monk sees it, if a man is unable to see through [the illusion] of labels, then it [is no different] from having five obstacles or a thousand obstacles or a hundred thousand obstacles! And if a woman is able to see through [the illusion of] labels, even if one were to look for a half of an obstacle [to block her], it will be impossible to do. You must not cling to dead words and phrases.

你若向父母未生以前一眼觀者箇禮，還有在家出家女人男子種種分別，然後不妨出家底一任出家，在家底一任在家，男子自是男子，女人自是女人，各各現成，各各自在，更不許移易一絲毫，許你莫道女人有五障畢竟要求轉男身方得稱佛。據山僧看來，若男子識不破不特五障千障也有萬障也有。女人若識得破要求般障也，不可得你切莫執死言句自生退屈甘爲下劣。⁵⁵

⁵⁴) Hanke Zuxin, “Shang tang, 213c.

⁵⁵) Hanke Zuxin, “Shang tang, 213c.

Here Hanke directly refutes the famous notion of the five obstacles (*wuzhang* 五障) which traditionally stood in the way of women ever achieving complete enlightenment in the female body. The notion of the five obstacles appears in the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, ironically enough the same chapter in which we find the famous story of the Dragon King's daughter who, upon offering a jewel to the Buddha, was instantly transformed into a man and attained Buddhahood herself. The original meaning of the five obstacles was that there were five spiritual states of existence that women were excluded from: those of Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin king, and Buddha. As Yoshida Kazuhiko points out, however, in East Asia the five obstacles came to refer to flaws or defects in women generally, including desires, unbridled passion, and, most seriously, the pollution of menstruation.⁵⁶ In other words, women were held back from enlightenment not because of certain external limitations but because of the very fact of their having been born female. Hanke, given the logic of the rest of his argument, cannot accept this notion of spiritual inequality and so brings his talk to a close with a reference to the two most famous stories of enlightened women, that of the Dragon Girl, which as we have seen can also be found in the *Lotus Sutra*, and that of the Tang dynasty nun, Miaoshan Liaoran 末山了然, famous for the "Dharma battle" in which she bested the arrogant monk who initially refused to understand the absence of an essential, unchanging essence that one can call "man" or "woman."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Yoshida Kazuhiko, "The Enlightenment of the Dragon King's Daughter in *The Lotus Sutra*," in Barbara Ruch, ed. *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Pre-Modern Japan*, 297-324.

⁵⁷ Moshan Liaoran is the only Tang dynasty nun who has a record of her own in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄, a collection of biographical accounts of monks of the Chan Buddhist lineage compiled in 1004. In fact, it is with Moshan Liaoran that we have the beginnings of what we might call a Chan Buddhist female lineage, although it sometimes is traced back even earlier to the semi-legendary nun Zongchi 總持, the one woman among four major disciples of Bodhidharma, the also semi-legendary First Patriarch of Chan. For a discussion of these women, both historical and legendary, see Miriam Levering, "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 (1982): 19-35; and Evelyn Ding-Hwa Hsieh, "Images of Women in Ch'an Buddhist Literature of the Sung period," in Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr., eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 148-87.

Once there was an official whose daughter left home to visit [religious teachers for instruction] and when she returned home wanted to leave the world and [become a nun]. The official invited a Chan master to meticulously test [the woman's determination]. This Chan master asked [her] about the Way, saying, "I have heard that you want to leave the world. Is that right?" "Correct," she replied. The Chan master said, "Women have the five obstacles. How do you think you can do this?" She [then] replied, "Have I not heard the story in the Lotus Sutra about the eight-year-old Dragon Girl who presented the Mani jewel and became a Buddha?" The Chan master said, "The Dragon Girl [was master of] a hundred thousand divine transformations. See if you can [perform even] a single transformation!" She replied, "You are just beating around the bush! To be able to effect a transformation is to be a fox spirit!" [He then recounted the story of how] The monk Guanxi from Linji's circle went to visit Moshan. Moshan beat the drum and ascended the Dharma dais, and Guanxi stepped forward and asked, "What is the realm of Moshan?" The nun answered, "It does not expose its peak." He asked again, "Who is the person within this realm?" The nun answered, "There is neither male or female form." He then asked, "Why do you not transform yourself?" The nun asked, "I am not a spirit, I am not a ghost, into what can I transform myself?" [The master then commented:] "Don't you see that these two [Moshan and the Dragon Girl] were both women who spit out words? And if they let out a mouthful, it is because each of them had seen through [labels] and can then be called *da zhangfu* and teachers of both men and gods. If all of you are able to see through [labels] then each and every one of you [can be considered] *da zhangfu*. This in the end is what it means to call someone a *da zhangfu*." Then, waving his walking staff he said, "Each of the magnolias flowering in the snow is fragrant, each of the willow leaves in the mirror is graceful." He then descended from the dais.

不見當時有個官人，他底姑出家參方，回來要出世。爲人官人請一禪師勘驗他。那禪師問道：聞汝要出世爲人是不？答云是。禪師道：女人有五障如何爲得人。答云：豈不聞法華經中八歲龍女供珠成佛麻。禪師道龍女有百千神變你試一變看。答云直饒變得也是箇野狐精又當日臨濟會下有個灌溪和尚來到末山尼會下末山打鼓上堂，灌溪出問云：如何是末山境。尼云：不露頂。又問如何是境中人。尼云：無男女相。又問爲甚麻不變。尼云：不是神不是鬼變個甚麻。你看他兩個豈不都是女人前後吐辭。若出一口只爲他每識得破便稱大丈夫天人師。大眾若識得破，個個都是大丈夫。畢竟若何方喚作大丈夫。卓拄杖云：雪裏芙蓉香朵朵鏡中柳葉曲灣灣。下坐⁵⁸

Hanke's sermon is interesting because in it he quotes the story of a woman, probably a contemporary who, in response to the query of the monk as to whether or not she realized that there were the five

⁵⁸) Hanke Zuxin, "Shang tang," 213c.

obstacles, retorted that she knew about the Dragon King's daughter in the *Lotus Sutra*, as well as the Tang dynasty nun Moshan Liaoran. And indeed we find that women monastics of the Ming-Qing continued to use the rhetoric of heroism to apply to themselves, and to their female disciples and followers.

It is more common, however, to find these women referring to themselves both as great gentlemen and as people who have transcended the labels of male and female. A particularly striking example of this is an inscription in four parts written by the seventeenth-century woman Chan master Zukui Jifu 祖揆濟符 for a self-portrait. In the first part of this text, Jifu Zukui identifies herself with Moshan Liaoran.

A scroll of white paper, a few cross-strokes of the black brush; it is neither female nor is it male. Where did this appearance come from? Being neither a spirit nor a ghost, what is there that could be transformed? When there are no words, the spittle accumulates next to the mouth; when there is vision, the eyes just become more blurred. One can't but laugh at Guanqixi's confused state: he mistakenly calls Linji his father!

白紙一福墨筆即叉，亦非男非女貌，從何得？不是神不是鬼，變個深麼？無語則口邊堆醜，有見則眼裏忒花。閒笑灌溪多莽攸。錯呼臨濟作爺爺。⁵⁹

The late seventeenth century Chan abbess Ziyong Chengru 子雍成如 (exact dates unknown), who was originally from the Beijing area, embarked on an extended pilgrimage to the Jiangnan region where she visited the funeral stupas of her male lineage ancestors. At one of these sites, she was warmly welcomed by her Dharma "cousins," who requested that she give a Dharma talk. At this talk, however, one of the monks appears to have probed into her qualifications as a member of the "true lineage." In her reply, she utilizes three of the most common formulations of the rhetoric of both heroism and equality and then, dismisses them all.

⁵⁹) Zikui Jifu, "Ziti" 自提, *Lingrui chanshi Yanhuaqi* 靈瑞禪師巖華集, *Jiaxing jing*, vol. 20, p. 754a. For more about this nun, see my *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-China*, esp. Chapter 8.

A monk then asked: “The great way is not to divide into male and female. Do you still permit someone to pose a question?” [Ziyong] replied: “The female master has always been a woman.”⁶⁰ The monk said: “Then pray tell, among the congregation assembled here like clouds, who in the end is the *zhangfu* among women?” [Ziyong] said: “Each and every person has the sky over their head; each and every one has the earth under their feet.” The monk then gave a shout. [Ziyong] said: “What is the point of recklessly shouting like that?” The monk then bowed respectfully.

又問大道不分男女相，還許某申問話？師云：師姑本是女人做。進云且道大眾雲集畢竟那個是女中丈夫。師云：人人頭頂天，個個腳踏地。僧便喝。師云：亂喝作麼？僧便禮拜。⁶¹

Concluding Remarks

In the early 1990s, then Harvard graduate student and filmmaker Wen-jie Qin, in her field work among nuns of Mount Emei, in Sichuan province, found a community of women who were very aware of their marginality but saw it as a source of empowerment rather than ostracization. In a modernizing culture that still clung to strict definitions of male and female social roles, for these women becoming nuns allowed them to break out of traditional gender expectations. This did not simply mean becoming “like a man,” nor did it involve an impossible effort to abandon gender identity altogether. Rather, as Qin notes,

Ambiguity, fluidity, and contextuality characterize the nuns’ self-awareness of their gender identity. They do not seem to have a rigid, static, or dogmatic sense of themselves as women *per se*. The nuns describe themselves as women, sometimes as both women and men, and sometimes as neither women or men.⁶²

⁶⁰ *Shigu tianran shi nüren zuo* 師姑天然是女人做: this phrase is said to have been first uttered by the Tang dynasty male Chan master Zhitong 智通 of Mount Wutai after his enlightenment experience. Later, we find it often used by male monks in their exchanges and correspondences with women. I am not sure what it means, except perhaps to indicate that it is women who are best suited to perform (*zuo* 做) the role of nun.

⁶¹ Ziyong Chengru, *Ziyong Ru chanshi yulu* 子雍如禪師語錄, *Jiaxing jing*, vol. 39, p. 827b. For more on Ziyong Chengru, see my *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China*, Chapter 9.

⁶² Qin Wen-jie, “The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China: Women Reconstruct Buddhism on Mt. Emei” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2000), 306.

The nuns studied by Qin also showed an awareness that the use of male-gendered terms did not necessarily mean that they thought of themselves or their fellow nuns as male. Thus, although they address their master as Teacher Father and each other as “Dharma Brother” (as has been the case since the establishment of the women’s monastic community in China), they took for granted that “these terms are just words borrowed for practical use and do not imply that the nuns really regard each other as men.”⁶³

Qin also found these women using the old term of *da zhangfu*, the qualities of which they sometimes contrasted “with the shortcomings of women, such as being sentimental and volatile. The nuns envy the virtue of the great man as something that women are by nature deficient in, but which they can obtain through self-effort.”⁶⁴ By the same token, these nuns also explained to Qin that “when they speak of *da zhangfu*, they are referring to great human beings and not just human beings.”⁶⁵ Although Qin considers this redefinition of *da zhangfu* to be a new interpretation, it is clear that it can be found in earlier periods as well. Indeed, some of these Buddhist monks and nuns would have found by no means revolutionary the claim by the contemporary feminist critic Judith Butler that gender is ultimately performative, a verb rather than a noun, “a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Butler asks her readers to think about Nietzsche’s claim that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming, ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed [which] is

⁶³ Qin, “The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China,” 306.

⁶⁴ Qin, “The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China,” 313.

⁶⁵ Qin, “The Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China,” 313-14. The discussion of the implications of the term *zhangfu* continues to be carried out today in reference to the unprecedented flourishing of female Buddhist monastics in Taiwan. Anthropologist Hillary Crane argues that in becoming nuns, these women are literally rejecting their feminine identities and striving to become as much like men as possible. See her article, “Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood,” *Critical Asian Studies* 36:2 (2004): 265-284. Other scholars consider that Crane goes to far in this regard. For example, Elise DeVido, who has spent a considerable amount of time with Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, would largely agree with Wen-jie Qin that in becoming nuns, women are embracing virtues traditionally regarded as “masculine,” such as determination, emotional strength, etc. However, this does not mean that they are rejecting positive virtues traditionally regarded as “feminine,” such as compassion, motherly nurturing, etc. (Personal correspondence, November 2007).

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (second ed.; New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

everything”—a notion that Nietzsche most surely derived from his readings in Eastern thought. In the West, contemporary feminists nevertheless balk at Butler’s notion that there is no such thing as a fixed gender identity, the idea of an absent doer, because it puts into question the possibility of agency and, ultimately, the possibility of transforming society.⁶⁷ For many seventeenth-century Chinese Buddhists (and, apparently, for many modern Buddhists as well) the fundamental Mahayana Buddhist notion of an absent doer, a performative and fluid gender, presented both a challenge to those who felt the necessity of retaining and reinforcing the traditional gendered social order, and an opportunity to those who felt confined and limited by that very order.

⁶⁷) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.