

# ***How Taiwanese Buddhism Responds to the Feminist Movement in Modern Taiwan***

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**Abstract:** Gender is a very important issue in religious studies. Although the issue of female identity was always ignored in a Buddhist society, we can find Buddhist attitudes towards women according to historical Buddhist texts. We find that Buddhists have a very ambivalent attitude towards female identity, acknowledging the equal spiritual potential of women while emphasizing their bad characteristics because of bad karma in the past. Because of the spread of Buddhist texts, this contradictory concept of gender has been extended to modern Buddhist society, leading to the obstacles of modern Buddhists responding to the female movement. This paper tries to analyze how Taiwanese Buddhism responds to the feminist movement in modern Taiwan. Through observing the efforts of two powerful Taiwanese local Buddhist organizations, we can see the efforts of Buddhist society in Taiwan to raise the status and level of learning of nuns, although based on accepting some discriminatory concepts of traditional Buddhist texts. The women's movement raised the social status and influence of nuns, allowing them to challenge the patriarchal Buddhist narrative and the traditional monastic system, and in turn instilled gender equality in the Buddhist community that monks and nuns are equalized.

**Keywords:** Buddhist studies, gender studies, nuns, Humanistic Buddhism

## **1. Introduction**

Gender is a very important issue in religious studies. In Buddhism, gender identity is always ignored. In Buddha's Dharma, gender is just a binary illusion. In the practice, every Buddhist needs to escape the limitation of such binary illusion. However, Buddhism must respond the gender identity as they need to analyze phenomena in the human world. Meanwhile, the gender difference is also inevitable in sangha, as monks and nuns have to live separately to be celibate.

Since Jinjian (靜檢) received the ten precepts [1], the tradition of Chinese nuns had continued for over 1700 years [2]. Nuns who wished to practice Buddhism as homeless almswomen played an important role in the Chinese history of Buddhism. The *Biographies of Buddhist Nuns* (Biqiuni Zhuan 比丘尼傳) written by Baochang (寶唱) is the earliest biography of Chinese nuns, which recorded the life of 65 nuns during the Six Dynasties [3]. The stories of ancient nuns in this book showed how nuns used their religious identity to escape the control of the traditional Confucians patriarchy family. Becoming a nun was a way to practice and prove their personal value.

In modern society, feminism and modernization have made women more methods to work and be celibate. Becoming nuns became an optional choice for them. However, Buddhists faced a new challenge: how to respond to differences between modern gender identity and traditional Buddhist gender identity. In ancient society, the identity of nuns helped women to get rid of bondage. But in modern times, nuns were hindered by the traditional identity of men and women. In this case, Taiwanese Buddhist community answered from different perspectives and different groups.

This paper aims to survey Taiwanese Buddhist community's reaction to feminist trend today. This paper will review Buddhist texts and other scholars' academic work, to summarize the traditional female identity in Buddhist view, Taiwanese special historical context for Buddhist gender identity renovation and the efforts of both monks and nuns to improve such issue. First, the paper will summarize the overall Buddhist traditional view of females. Second, the paper will introduce the historical and political background of Taiwan Buddhist community, to help readers understand why such a movement happened in Taiwan. Third, the paper will use the example of representative figures in Taiwan sangha, to show how they use different ways to support nuns' empowerment. I argue that the whole sangha, including both monks and nuns, has made a significant effort on balancing the traditional female identity in doctrines and the increasing feminist consciousness in modern society. For monks, they recognized nuns' abilities and constructed a more equal monasterial structure with nuns. For nuns, they grasped the opportunity to show their ability and virtue, and finally altered public's view on nuns and won public respect.

## 2. Complex Buddhist Female Identity

Chinese Buddhist female identity is very complex. As Shi argued there is feminism in liberation, male supremacy in the system and misogyny in practice [3]. In primitive Buddhism, the Buddha recognized the potential for women to become Buddha [4]. The goal of Buddhism is awakening, and gender is not an important element in such spiritual transformation. Also, gender difference is just an impermanent and dualistic illusion in Buddhist principle [5]. However, the disparagement of women was hidden in the early description of Buddha's stories. In *Ekottarika Āgama* (增一阿含經) and *Yue Sutra* (玉耶經), the Buddha listed nine evil nature of women and ten bad things about living in a female body respectively. The nine negative character trend along with female body taught by the Buddha to his disciples are "not pure", harsh speech, inconsistent, jealous, mean, loving to go outside, vengeful and speaking frivolously<sup>1</sup>. The ten bad sufferings encountered when beings rebirth as females showed the possible sufferings in physical body and spiritual feelings when a woman lives in the world<sup>2</sup>. The observation of women's suffering showed the Buddha's pity and compassion as he tried to understand the experience of women in his stage, but he argued that rebirth as a woman is because of bad karma at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup>“夫為女人有九惡法。云何為九？一者女人臭穢不淨，二者女人惡口，三者女人無反復，四者女人嫉妬，五者女人慳嫉，六者女人多喜遊行，七者女人多瞋恚，八者女人多妄語，九者女人所言輕舉。A woman has nine vices. What are these nine? First, women are stinking and not pure; second, women always say unkind things; third, women are capricious; fourth, women envy (others); fifth, women are mean; sixth, women love to walk, seventh, women hate (others) more; eighth, women talk in vain; ninth, women speak lightly”. T02, no. 125, p. 769c10-15.

<sup>2</sup>“女人身中有十惡事，不自覺知。何等十惡？一者託生父母甚難養育，二者懷妊憂愁，三者初生父母不喜，四者養育無味，五者父母隨逐不離時宜，六者處處畏人，七者常憂嫁之，八者生已父母離別，九者常畏夫婿，十者不得自在，是名十惡也。There are ten evil things along with female bodies, but women did not realize them. What are these ten bad things? The first is the hardness for parents to raise girls; the second is the suffering of delivery; the third is the unhappiness for parents when they found their kid is a girl; the fourth is the irresponsible care from parents; the fifth is the requirements for parents to accompany daughters; the sixth is the fear to others in every points; the seventh is the worries for their marriage; the eighth is the parting with their parents; the ninth is the frequent fear to their husband; the tenth is the sense of bondage.”T02, no. 142b, pp. 864c29-865a6.

The Eight Garudhammas, although was proved that it is not the teaching of the Buddha by Bhikkhuni Shih [6], showed male supremacy in Vinaya. The Eight Garudhammas were eight rules which were initially the condition set by the Buddha to his stepmother Mahapajapati and her 500 female followers who begged the Buddha to allow them to join the sangha [7], and these Eight Garudhammas have become the rules of nuns since Mahapajapati became the first nun in the world. All the Eight Garudhammas mentioned monks, and the content of the Eight Garudhammas pushed the position of nuns lower than monks [7]. The most obvious rule to show the “inferiority” of nuns in sangha is the first rule, which requires even the senior nuns to bow down to a junior monk [7]. The respect here is not about the ability or power in the sangha, but just because of the gender difference.

Also, the view that women are not “pure” can be found in the Buddhist canon *Samyukta Āgama* (雜阿含經)<sup>3</sup> (T02n0099). In Hinayana, Buddhists denied the potential of women to liberate and they raised the concept “five obstacles” (五礙說), which emphasized the negative nature of women and discouraged many female Buddhists to practice [8]. Mahayana shows a more advanced gender identity. It argued that all beings hold equalized buddha nature and there is no gender difference from the standpoint of dharma [4].

### 3. The Land of Buddhist Feminism

When we think about the reason why Taiwanese nuns are so special, we probably can find the answer in Taiwanese history.

Since 1661, a lot of Chinese fled into Taiwan because of Man-chu invasion, and they brought their Buddhist culture to this land. However, there is a small number of orthodox monks and nuns due to its geographical condition. Before Japanese colonial period (1895-1945), the most popular religion in Taiwan is called zhaijiao, which is very similar with Buddhism in its doctrine [9]. Due to political reason, a large number of eminent monks and nuns fled into Taiwan since 1949, which offered the condition to hold an orthodox ordination ceremony. The first dual ordination ceremony which required at least one *bhikṣu* and one *bhikṣuṇī* to supervise was held in 1970 [10]. Many women joined zhaijiao, and they were known as “vegetarian women” (*zhaigu* 齋姑). Later, many of them received full ordination to become nuns. The existence of many *zhaigu* enforced Buddhist leader to listen female renunciants’ voice, and they also designed special classes for women [9]. Thus, have a higher level of education and voice, which provided the perquisite of Buddhist feminism.

Meanwhile, Taiwan’s economic and social progress also promoted Buddhist feminist consciousness. Taiwan experienced an economic rapid development since 1970s and the end of martial law in 1987, which increased donations to temples and enlarged the range of social services of Buddhist organizations [10]. Buddhism seized the opportunity to grow, growing the Buddhist population from 2 million to 8 million within 20 years, accounting for 35% of the total population [7]. A large number of believers, sufficient donations and a democratic political environment enable nuns to carry out social activities, and then influence people’s female identity.

### 4. Humanistic Buddhism and Female Identity

As the dominant Buddhist school in Taiwanese Buddhist discourse since 1980s [11], the Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) which was initiated by *bhikkhu* Taixu (太虛) (1890-1947) has made a significant influence in Buddhist female identity in Taiwan. Humanistic Buddhism is intent on bringing the “Pure land” into human realm, and it argues that Buddhist should focus on topics in human society and help people follow the Buddha’s teaching [11]. Thus, the Humanistic

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<sup>3</sup>“女人梵行垢，女則累世間。Women are dirty in practice; women are encumbrance of the world”. T02, no. 99, p. 266a10.

Buddhism emphasizes the role of social affairs, such as building hospitals and schools, and discusses actively modern issues, such as global warming and gender inequality [7]. The characteristic of Humanistic Buddhism made Buddhists become more inclusive of western ideologies, and it also urges them realize the contradiction between the traditional female identity in Buddhist canons and the needs of empowering female Buddhists in modernization of Buddhism. Yinshun 印順 (1906-2005) promoted Taixu's philosophy in the name of *renjianfojiao* in Taiwan after 1949. He argued that Buddhist should cultivate their bidhisattva seed to make our human realm better. His ideology had a profound impact on the development of nuns in Taiwan, as he was the sponsor of the most famous Taiwanese nun Cheng Yen and the teacher of Chao Hwei and Kuan Ch'ien [12].

However, Taixu and Yinshun did not build a system of female identity in their philosophical discourses. The first one who described a clear female identity in Humanistic Buddhism is Venerable Hsing-Yun (星雲), and he is also the founder of *foguangshan* (佛光山)—one of the most influential sangha in Taiwan [11]. In his articles, he described the ideal image of Buddhist women. Under the context that patriarchal values dominated Taiwan society in 1980s and the inevitable influence of negative description about women in sutras, Ven. Hsing-Yun's article and books implied misogynistic language [13]. However, Ven. Hsing-Yun inherited Mahayana female value of liberation, that women can become buddha. In the level of ideology, Ven. Hsing-Yun combined Buddhism, women, and human realm together, to emphasize the remarkable contribution of women to the development of both human society and Buddhism. As he said: "Women are indispensable in this human realm" and "Buddhism needs women's participation more" [13]. As a modern Buddhist leader, Ven. Hsing-Yun expressed his admiration and respect for the fine character and outstanding contribution of women.

In the construction of *foguangshan*, Ven. Hsing-Yun showed his attitude towards women in action. The statistics pointed that the number of nuns is five times the number of monks in *foguangshan*. Whatever seniority, the share of nuns is always larger than monks. In key positions of *foguangshan*, including temple management, education, reception of worshippers and social welfare, the ratio of monks and nuns is three to fourteen [13]. *Foguangshan* provides a stage for nuns to participate in the core of the sangha, which was impossible in the traditional module of sangha that nuns only could assist monks to manage sangha. Nuns used their outstanding participation in the construction of *foguangshan* demonstrated the vision of Ven. Hsing-Yun—women can, and they did before, contribute to the development of Buddhism.

It is worth noticing that the Eight Garudhammas was "ignored" in *foguangshan*. On the one hand, Ven. Hsing-Yun admitted the Eight Garudhammas as the rules enacted by the Buddha, which his disciplines should observe. On the other hand, Ven. Hsing-Yun considered the change of social context, there is an increasing need to empower nuns, and the Eight Garudhammas is a huge hinderance for them. Thus, *foguangshan* apparently obey these old Vinaya, and they "threw them away" in fact [13]. Obviously, *foguangshan* tried to find a balance between the Buddha's teaching and people's appeal. They updated their precepts in a cautious and careful manner. However, some Buddhist were not satisfied with modest improvement, and they demanded a more radical religious reform.

## 5. Luminary Nuns: A Feminist Buddhist Group

Unlike the previously mentioned nuns who are famous by their individual image, luminary nuns (*guangmingni* 光明尼) are known as a collective group [11]. Like Chao-hwei, luminary nuns intentionally purse women empowerment in Buddhist community.

The luminary temple was originally a small temple dedicated to Guanyin statue in a rural village. After villager's application for a temple host to BAROC, *bhikkhuni Xinzhi* arrived at this temple. She

left after naming this temple as “luminary”, her classmate at Buddhist college *Bhikkhuṇī* Wu-Yin succeed in managing the luminary temple [11]. These two nuns are the key character to help us understand the transformation of the luminary temple from a local worship place to a famous temple with respectable sangha. The philosophy of *Bhikkhuṇī* Tianyi (1924-1980) made a profound influence on their management of the luminary temple. *Bhikkhuṇī* Tianyi was a nun with high education level, and she had an experience as a trainer of percepts. In her teaching, she emphasized the independence of Buddhist women. “*Bhikkhuṇī* must stand up” [11], this slogan tried to help nuns escape from the control of male sangha. *Although bhikkhuṇī* Tianyi could not take an action to respond her thoughts considering the political context, her teaching shows an intention of feminist reconstruction, to resist the suppression of Buddhist women by patriarchy represented by the Eight Garudhammas.

According to the research by Wei-yi Cheng, the phenomenon of Luminary nuns can be regarded as a response to feminism trend in Taiwan. These nuns worship the goddess guanyin, and they widened the monastic robe to hide their female curve [9]. Also, they provided retreats only for women, as they recognize the special demand for Buddhist women to practice [9]. These things could be found similarity with the recording of the *Biographies of Buddhist Nuns* [1], that nuns played a role as spiritual supporters for mundane women and divine women who have not been sexualized. However, the Luminary nuns have cultivated an image of independent, well-educated, and well-disciplined nuns to the public, which was different with traditional nuns. In China, most nuns hold low education degree, and they only do manual labor, such as cleaning and growing vegetables [14]. Thus, it is unusual that the luminary nuns are famous for their high education background and academic works. They established a press, to express their spiritual experience, publish academic work of Buddhist study and some translated books [9]. Facheng 法澄 did translation work, too. She translated the *Yulanpen Sutra* (盂蘭盆經) and the *Fo shuo wenshixiyu zhongseng Sutra* (佛說溫室洗浴眾僧經) in Tang dynasty [3]. However, her academic attribution could be preserved, may be because nuns in the past did not have their publishing house and nuns’ efforts have not attracted enough attention. The establishment of nuns’ press provide a stage for nuns to talk their story by themselves, to avoid the fate that “been written and defined by others” [9].

The most outstanding attribution of luminary nuns is their education. Education is the key for women to change their fate. For nuns, education is a path to improve their social status and achieve independence [9]. In public perception, nuns are often practitioners who do not have any spiritual insights and only know how to do rituals and do physical work. To change public altitude to nuns, *bhiksuni* Wu Yin founded the Luminary Buddhist Institute in 1980. The Luminary Buddhist Institute set a high admission standard, that student must hold at least high school degree before, to ensure students’ sincerity for pursuing higher Buddhist education. This school not only teach nuns Buddhist knowledge but also the knowledge of modern science, including management and psychology [9]. Also, the Luminary Buddhist Institute trained nuns with an orthodox monastic model, which provided a fixed timetable to guide nuns’ daily life [11]. Thus, the graduated nuns from the Luminary Buddhist were respected because of their academic performance and self-discipline.

The Luminary nuns showed what extent a nuns’ organization can achieve. They are aware of their disadvantaged position as women in Buddhist community, and they have made more efforts than men to change such situation. They seized the opportunity of Taiwanese increasing education level, to transfer the nuns’ image from a traditional, passive, and un-educated nun into an orthodox but responding to modern ideology, active and educated in both dharma and modern science nun. They have proved that the success of nuns is not an exception, but something that can be generalized and emulated.



## 6. Conclusion

How much a woman can achieve? The answer is everything that human can do. In this era of rising female consciousness, Taiwan Buddhism, guided by the spirit of humanistic Buddhism, has answered this question from the perspective of Buddhism. The concept of human Buddhism and the construction of Foguangshan made the Buddhist society started to pay attention to the secular issues, trying to solve the social contradictions with the efforts of the Buddhist Dharma and the Buddhist community. Foguangshan also pursues gender equality in practical system and encourages nuns to participate in temple management, which gives nuns a chance to show their potential.

Relying on their own wisdom and kindness, nuns show their ability, knowledge, and character to the public and are respected by the public. The women's movement raised the social status and influence of nuns, allowing them to challenge the patriarchal Buddhist narrative and the traditional monastic system, and in turn instilled gender equality in the Buddhist community that monks and nuns are equalized.

Furthermore, as the Buddha in India taught the middle way under the background of polarization between asceticism and hedonism, the modern Buddhism's answer of female identity can also be regarded as a form of "middle way", between traditional Asian gender identity and the western feminism. The response of Taiwanese Buddhism may offer a more moderate and appropriate gender identity to female Buddhists who are eager to find more freedom of the road of life.

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