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Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns

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A Review of *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*

Mavis L. Fenn¹

Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns. By Elise Anne DeVido. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010, xvii + 188 pages, ISBN: 978-1438431482 (paper), US \$24.95.

Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns is a welcome addition to scholarship on women in Buddhism. This volume will be of interest to both Buddhist scholars and the general reader. There is a paucity of material available in English about Taiwanese nuns and the book comes with a good bibliography. Among the issues addressed by DeVido are the following: the relationship between socio-economic development and Buddhist reform movements, the advancement of Buddhist women into positions of authority, and their prominent role in ordination movements in both Theravāda and Vajrayāna Buddhism. She also provides some insight into the lives and thoughts of these nuns. Finally, she examines where they might fit on the spectrum of political thought associated with the term “feminism.” Although DeVido does not answer these questions in much detail, she has successfully laid the ground work for future work on these issues.

Chapter one discusses historical scholarship from the Qing Dynasty forward and comes to the conclusion that, while Taiwan has always had a large number of nuns and those nuns have always been engaged in

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charitable works, meditation, and teaching, it was the confluence of events that began with Japanese colonisation and culminated after 1987 that propelled the nuns forward in a way unprecedented in Buddhist history. After 1987, monks began to provide widespread support for the career and educational advancement of nuns, the dual ordination process was reinstated, and a lax attitude towards the Eight Rules was maintained. These things, in combination with the effects of a developing economy and the nuns' own tireless efforts, led to their profound achievements.

Three chapters are devoted to Master Zhengyan and the projects and women associated with Ciji (Compassion-Relief Foundation), likely the largest foundation in Taiwan and the only one headed by a nun. While there are no doubts as to the charitable contributions of Ciji, DeVido raises concerns about the power of large religious organisations to use contributions to further their Buddhist agenda. The example she uses is Project Hope. The architecture and design for the schools built under the auspices of this project after the 1999 earthquake in Taiwan were influenced by Ciji teachings, and copies of Master Zhengyan's book *Still Thoughts* were donated to those schools as a teaching aid for the moral reconstruction of society. Given that there appears to be little resistance to these things on the part of either the government or society in general, DeVido is concerned to examine the values that underlie Ciji's vision of the world, especially as it pertains to women.

DeVido's examination of the philosophy of Ciji indicates that what is promoted is an individual ethic with a relational view of gender issues. That is, in working for the transformation of society and its ills, Ciji focuses on the actions of individuals and the need to take personal responsibility. There is thus no critique of the systemic issues that contribute to social problems. Views of women are essentialist; e.g., "A loving, merciful, compassionate heart is the mark of a woman" (75).

These qualities, identified with Buddhist values as exemplified by the bodhisattva Guanyin, place a positive value on women and their compassionate charitable work. Because of Ciji's emphasis on an individual ethic, this work is accomplished within the traditional Confucian hierarchical family structure. DeVido questions the ability of such a model to draw young professional women to Ciji as volunteers in the future. Moreover, given that nuns are largely invisible in the organization, it is unlikely they could serve as role models for modern monastic life.

In order to determine whether Ciji's views on Buddhism and the role of women within it is normative or not, DeVido turns to an examination of the nuns of the Luminary Buddhist Institute, which was founded in Taiwan in 1980 by the nun Wu Yin to train nuns as *dharma* teachers. The primary mandate of the nuns of the Luminary Buddhist Institute is their own education and scholarship, as well as public education in the *dharma*. Wu Yin has been very active in the *bhikkhuni* ordination movement within the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions.

While the Luminary nuns do engage in some social service, there is not the emphasis on social reconstruction through Buddhist teaching that one sees in Ciji, and no special emphasis is given to the thought of Wu Yin. The Luminary nuns are aware of systemic problems and have worked with other NGOs regarding the reconstruction of aboriginal villages after the 1999 earthquake. They are also aware of the difficulties encountered by foreign wives in Taiwan. Luminary nuns provide instruction in Chinese language, Taiwanese culture, and they give foreign wives an opportunity to build support networks outside their homes. Such educational initiatives are seen as a way women can move from self-empowerment to collective empowerment. This presents an opportunity for change. The nuns also believe that educational

initiatives provide the opportunity for creating a broader Taiwanese identity and a more egalitarian society.

But, are the Luminary nuns feminist? Regardless of the fact that the nuns themselves do not use the term and many older nuns share some essentialist ideas about inherent feminine traits, DeVido argues that their style of empowerment is feminist and that they have benefitted from the feminist movement as well as their own efforts. DeVido appears to be somewhat uncomfortable with the essentialist position throughout, although she recognizes its transformative power in raising the traditional low evaluation of women and their capabilities.

In the final section of the book, DeVido turns her attention to the impact that modernist Buddhist thought, particularly that of Taixu and Yinshun, has had on views about nuns and women in general. She concludes that there have been two different streams of engaged Buddhism in Taiwan that have grown out of these two thinkers' notions of a "Buddhism for the Human Realm." The first, evidenced at Foguangshan, Ciji, and Dharma Drum, is evolutionary in that while there is social engagement, broad social change is expected to come through transformation of the individual. The second stream of engaged Buddhism is evidenced in the efforts of the monk Shi Chuandao and the nun Chao Hwei who are both considered to be radical activists. Chao Hwei has contributed to the explication of Yinshun's works and has written on a wide variety of modern ethical issues such as abortion, stem cell research and animal rights. While Chao Hwei has acknowledged the good works done by organizations such as Ciji, she believes they are limited in that they do not attack the roots of social problems such as poverty and environmental degradation. She indicates that she follows Taixu in believing that Buddhists should be politically engaged but not take office, acting as a "permanent opposition party" (105); and she supports Yinshun's egalitarian interpretation of Buddhism, though, as

DeVido states, she owes more to modern feminist critique and activism. Chao Hwei has consistently called for the abolishment of the Eight Rules, a controversial position among all elements of the Buddhist community. DeVido concludes that from Yinshun's bodhisattva who serves society, Chao Hwei has created a model of a social activist.

DeVido concludes her book by answering the questions she posed in the introduction. Buddhist women's efforts have caused a form of engaged Buddhism to flourish in Taiwan; monastics are now considered educated professionals, and Taiwanese Buddhists play an important role in developing global Buddhism and reinstituting the nuns' order. Buddhism's role in shaping the role and identity of Taiwanese women has been ambiguous and may either contribute to its own success or prove a limitation, but overall, Buddhist women have played an important role in the development of civil society in Taiwan.

Although I am happy to recommend *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*, it does have its limitations. This is not surprising given that it is a slim 188 pages. Its primary limitation is its lack of detailed analysis. Each of the following issues requires a more comprehensive discussion: the impact on Buddhist women, and nuns especially, of a changing socio-economic situation; approaches to socially engaged Buddhism; views about women and feminism; and education and social service. These are important issues and I hope a subsequent volume will deal with them in a more sustained way. In this spirit, I would like to raise a few questions for the future.

Modernism and the transformation of the economy have provided more opportunities for women in Taiwan to gain educations and undertake serious *dharma* studies. Will young women continue to enter monastic life in the numbers in which they did so in the past as opportunities for them in society increase? I would like to hear more about the different views held by older and younger nuns in the Luminary Nuns

organization and how it affects their relationships with one another and the execution of their programs. DeVido notes in a few places that she believes essentialist views of women may prevent Buddhist organizations from working with secular NGOs towards women's improvement. Why is this? Finally, DeVido provides us with a spectrum of ideas about women as found in the works of Zhengyan to Chao Hwei, as well as in their critiques of each other. I would have found a broader meta-analysis valuable here. Is there a sense that there might be room for the coordination of these approaches or is increasing division and competition more likely?