Chinese Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen in a Changing World

Harmonizing Tradition and Modernity throughout 20th and 21st Century

Ester Bianchi

(University of Perugia, Italy)
ester.bianchi@unipg.it

E- Learning Course on Asian Buddhist Women
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Tiexiangsi 鐵像寺 and the Sichuan Nuns Institute for Buddhist Studies 四川尼眾佛學院
Longlian 隆蓮 (1909-2006)
A. Introduction: Chinese Buddhist Women at the century turn

B. Longlian’s life and deeds > major events in modern China and modern Chinese Buddhism

C. Longlian’s Legacy > Buddhist nuns and women in contemporary China


• Valussi Elena, “Gender as a useful category of analysis in Chinese Religions – with two case studies from the Republican period” (paper presented at the conference “Framing the Study of Religion in Modern China and Taiwan: Concepts, Methods and New Research Paths”, Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia at the University of Groningen, December 9-12, 2015).
A) Introduction: Chinese Buddhist Women at the century turn
Buddhist and Daoist Nuns
(Ming, Guimet)
Notions on women/nuns in Chinese Buddhism

From the Vinaya texts and related literature:
1) the idea that the very existence of Buddhist nuns weakens the Buddhadharma;
2) the necessity, in order to prevent this, of nuns’ submission to male clergy;
3) the idea of weakness and impurity of women;
4) positive figures as Mahaprajapati, aunt and stepmother of the Buddha and founder of the Buddhist nuns’ order.

From the Mahayana tradition:
1) the idea of the impossibility for women of becoming Buddha;
3) the need for the transformation of gender;
4) the inconsistency of the sexual transformation concept.
“Three aunties and six grannies”
(sangu liupo 三姑六婆)

1-3) Buddhist nuns, Daoist nuns and female fortune-tellers (尼姑、道姑、卦姑);

4-8) procuresses, matchmakers, sorceresses, madams of brothels, female herbalists and midwives (牙婆、媒婆、师婆、虔婆、药婆、稳婆).
Yang Wenhui 楊文會
(Renshan 仁山)
(1837-1911)
Taixu 太虛
(1890-1947)
B) Longlian 隆蓮 (1909-2006)’s life and deeds
Wang Enyang 王恩洋 (1897-1964)
Fazun 法尊 (1902-1980)
Nenghai 能海
(1886-1967)
Sherap Gyatso (1884-1968)
Changja qutughtu （1891-1957）
Changyuan 昌圆 (1879-1944)
Nenghai on Wutaishan (1960s)
Longlian’s writings
Longlian’s calligraphy
Erbuseng jie 二部僧戒 (“ordination conferred by the two saṃgha-orders”)

“After a woman has been trained as a probationer (śikṣamāṇā 式叉摩那) for two years, the ordination ceremony must be carried out in both (nuns’ and monks’) orders”.

(Gurudharma / bajingfa 八敬法, exposed in the Dharmaguptavinaya 四分律: T. 1428: 923a26–b21)

- Transmitted to China from Śrī Lanka in 433-434

- Shuyu 書玉, “Dual ordination procedures” (Erbuseng shoujie yishi 二部僧受戒儀式)
«Buddhism is a science of wisdom. It is very difficult to understand, so it is really important to have masters. I had many masters myself. Half of the Buddhist doctrine I have learned comes from my masters, and half from my independent study and practice. Without teachers I would not have what I have attained today» (Longlián, 1995)
Longlian and Dingjing 定静 (1903-1997)
Tongyuan 通愿 (1913-1991)
Sichuan Nuns Institute for Buddhist Studies
四川尼眾佛學院 (Tiexiangsi, 1996)
The Ordination Issue
“Dual ordination” in Tiexiangsi and Wenshuyuan (Chengdu 1982)
Dual ordination in Tiexiangsi (Chengdu, 1987)
1981: first bhikṣu ordination in Beijing Guangjisi 廣濟寺 (47 ordinees);
1982: first bhikṣuṇī ordination in Chengdu Tiexiangsi 鐵像寺 in 1982 (nine ordinees > śikṣamāṇās)

1980s-2010s:
- Process of uniformation (unique models disregarding local varieties)
- Process of monopolization (only the BAC can organize ordinations)
- Process of standardization
✓ “triple platform ordination”
(santan dajie 三壇大戒);

✓ “dual ordination” or “ordination conferred by the two samgha-orders”
(erbuseang jie 二部僧戒)
“Triple platform ordination”

I. Novice ordination (10 precepts of noviciate);
II. Full ordination (prātimokṣa prohibitions: 250 for monks and 348 for nuns);
III. Bodhisattva ordination.

The three rites are held altogether within a short period of time.
“Dual ordination” (Emeishan, 08/2014)
Fual ordinatio at Donglu Guanyinsi 東廬觀音寺 (Lishui, Jiangsu, November 2013)
Longlian’s relics
Longlian’s stupas
Longlian relics (隆蓮法師舍利) are the most tangible proof of her spiritual achievements:

1) as the final outcomes of a lifetime of study and meditation (disciples view)

2) as the concrete demonstration of her holy nature (many commoners view)
Longlian’s memorial Hall
Worship of Longlian
C) Longlian’s Legacy: Buddhist Women in Contemporary China
Shanghai East China Normal University (2007)
- 31.4% (300 millions) engages in religious practices;
- 66.1% (200 millions) is Buddhist and/or Daoist.

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2010)
- 15% is non-religious > 85% engages in religious practices.
  - 18% is exclusively Buddhist;
Number of Buddhist monasteries:

- 2007: 16,000 monasteries and 32 Buddhist Studies Academies;
- 2008: 20,000 Buddhist monasteries.
Size of the Han Buddhist clergy in Mainland China (Ji Zhe 2012 and 2013):

✓ 1930s: 738,000 monks and nuns;
✓ 1949: about 500,000;
✓ 1949-1966: rapid and dramatic decline down to a few thousand Buddhist monastics;
✓ 1997: the size of Han Chinese Buddhist clergy was around 70,000;
✓ 2009: about 80,000

> Nowadays most probably around 100,000 Han Buddhist monastics. Ca. 30% are nuns.
Cixue 慈學 (1920-)

[Image of Cixue standing outdoors in traditional robes]
Yinkong 印空
(1921- )
Everyday life
Rituals and ceremonies
Funerary rites
Pilgrim nuns (Wutaishan, 2007)
Chanting and meditation
Official engagement
Abbess and monks (Wutaishan, 2007)
Young scholar nun
Rural nunnery (Chongzhou, 2010)
Eremit-nun (Putuoshan, 2007)
Concluding Remarks
Longlian’s heirs (Changwu 昌悟, Renyi 仁義, Longhui 隆慧 (Aidaotang 愛道堂))
Guoping 果平 and “Second master” (2008)
Guoping 果平 (Baitasi 白塔寺)
Thank you
Selected Bibliography on Chinese Buddhist women


• LI Yuzhen 李玉珍 2007a, “The Ordiantion System of the Late Imperial China”, First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha, Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages, University of Hamburg (unpublished).
• — 2014, “Ordination into the Sangha and Promulgation of Buddhism: Buddhist Nuns’ Identity Formation and Identity Consolidation in Post-War Taiwan” (Unpublished material presented for the research project “Vinaya revival in 20th century China and Taiwan”).
• QIU Shanshan 裘山山 1997, Dangdai di yi biqiuni: Longlian fashi zhuan 當代第一比丘尼—隆蓮法師傳, Fuzhou, Fujian meishu chubanshe.