

## A Study of Gender Equality in Humanistic Buddhism

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### Abstract

Since Humanistic Buddhism was first proposed by Master Taixu, the issue of gender equality has gradually kindled widespread discussion in the field of Buddhism. During the Republican Era, Master Taixu and the female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara have actively expressed their views on gender equality. Eventually, they reached a consensus of respecting a woman's character, protecting her rights, and advocating equal status between men and women. After 1949, under the impetus of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Venerable Yin Shun, Venerable Sheng Yen, Venerable Chao-hwei, thoughts on gender equality in Taiwan have made great strides. After 1980, the rejuvenation of Humanistic Buddhism in Mainland China in turn developed thoughts on gender equality. As a result, the overall status of female Buddhists in Mainland China has remarkably improved.

**Keywords:** Humanistic Buddhism, gender equality, Taiwan, Mainland China

Since the beginning of Buddhism, women's issues have always received great attention. There are discussions in the *sūtras* and the Vinaya (collection of monastic rules) concerning issues such as female renunciation, women's status, and gender relations. In a nutshell, the attitude of ancient Indian Buddhism towards women has always cycled between respecting women and rejecting women. After Buddhism's spread to China, due to China's domestic politics, economics, cultures, and various other reasons, there was no lack of flash points in Chinese Buddhism regarding women. On the whole, the discrimination towards women derived from ancient Indian Buddhism persisted.

For a long time, Chinese Buddhist female adherents have been on the verge of obscurity. It is difficult to compare them with men in all aspects. Since modern times, with the introduction of gender equality in the West and the trend of women's emancipation, especially within Humanistic Buddhism as advocated by Master Taixu, the issue of gender equality has gradually attracted attention across the board from both men and women within the contemporary Buddhist community. During the Republican Era, Master Taixu and some women who had an earlier awakening expressed their own thoughts on this issue, and basically reached a consensus that Buddhism respects women's character, protects women's rights, and advocates equal status between men and women.

After 1949, contemporary Humanistic Buddhism continued to develop in Taiwan. The thought of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism progressed further and matured. Under the impetus of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Master Yin Shun, Master Sheng Yen and Master Chao-hwei, the idea of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism has made remarkable strides both in theory and in practice, until it has become the gold standard, leading Buddhism globally. Relatively speaking, Buddhism in Mainland China experienced a long-term stagnation in that same period, until it gradually rejuvenated in the 1990s. During this period, Master Long Lian and others have been committed to the development of Buddhist women's groups and have made outstanding contributions to the improvement of the overall status of female Buddhists.

The intent of writing this article is to systematically sort out thoughts on gender equality from the aforementioned spiritual leaders of Humanistic Buddhism, to conduct an all-encompassing assessment on the ideological

development of Humanistic Buddhism in this field over the past 100 years, and with the hope to provide a theoretical reference for Humanistic Buddhism to promote gender equality into the future.

### 1. Thoughts on Gender Equality in Humanistic Buddhism during the Republican Era

Beginning in the late Qing Dynasty, China opened its doors, and feminist ideas of gender equality and women's liberation of the West were introduced to the country. These ideas were gradually accepted by the people of China and had a direct impact on promoting the development of the feminist movement there. At the same time, with incoming waves of Western culture, traditional Chinese culture could not withstand this challenge initially. An important aspect of traditional culture is Chinese Buddhism. It was on the verge of being unable to revitalize itself when faced with the risk of elimination under Western intellectual influences.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Chinese Buddhism was already facing deep troubles, both domestically and abroad. In this context, as one of the earliest pioneers of contemporary Chinese Buddhism—who opened people's eyes and broadened people's horizons in viewing the world—the young Master Taixu had long been exposed to “new Chinese and Western ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, he was able to take the *prajna* insights of Chan Buddhism along with the understanding of the doctrines, such as the Tiantai School, adapt them to the trends of thought in this era, and gradually established the ideology of Humanistic Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> With the in-depth development of the domestic feminist movement, the idea of promoting gender equality gradually had an effect on Buddhism. At that time, there was a growing voice within Buddhism to promote the status of women

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1. Luo Tongbing, *Taixu's Thoughts on the Modernization of Chinese Buddhism* (Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 2003), 1.

2. *Id.*, 5.

3. Venerable Taixu, “A Brief History of My Buddhist Reform Movement,” in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu* (Beijing: Religion Culture Publishing House, 2004), vol. 31, 65. Hereinafter, the references to Master Taixu's works will all be from this source. Only the volume and page numbers will be indicated. Other publishing details will be omitted.

and promote gender equality. Faced with this unavoidable request, Master Taixu—who advocated actively, adapting to the “times of thought”—responded positively to this issue.

Based on the theories of buddha-nature, emptiness, and causality, Master Taixu pointed out that all sentient beings “have the potential of achieving the highest level of consciousness,” so “in this respect alone, all things are equal.”<sup>4</sup> From the Buddhist theory of emptiness, reflecting upon impermanence and non-self, it is understood that everything in the world is “empty” in its essence. Applying this theory of emptiness to life, we know that everything in life results from conditions. Conditions themselves impact one another interchangeably. Their intrinsic nature is also empty. From here, we can “see life is the most equal.”<sup>5</sup> According to the Buddhist law of cause and effect, “all things in the world” are essentially the products of conditions, all of which have innate and universal “causality.” At the same time, it is precisely because of the existence of “causality” that everything is completely equal.<sup>6</sup> Based on these three aspects of the theory of equality, Master Taixu further pointed out that men and women are considered as one part of all living beings in the world. Both generally encompass the buddha-nature and cannot possibly transcend the constraints of emptiness and causality. Therefore, men and women are absolutely equal in their buddha-nature without any distinction. One may think that “the difference between a woman’s body and a man’s body is only a one-time karma. One should not be too attached to the emptiness of the gender inequality in the world but rather one should go beyond this inequality in pursuit



Chinese Buddhist nuns in the Republic of China.

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4. Taixu, 〈佛陀學綱〉 in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu* Volume 1, 195.
  5. Taixu, 〈從無我唯心的宇宙觀到平等自由的人生觀〉 in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu*, Volume 23, 424.
  6. Taixu, 〈提供談文化建設者幾條佛學〉 in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu*, Volume 22, 103.

of *buddha-nature*, *emptiness*, *causality*, and so on where the “existence of true equality lies.”<sup>7</sup> Under this concept of gender equality, Master Taixu made a breakthrough in the traditional Buddhist idea of discrimination towards women to a certain extent, and gave immense support and encouragement to the development of Buddhist women, who were in a vulnerable position.

As for *bhikṣuṇīs*, Master Taixu encouraged them to view themselves exactly the same as *bhikṣūs* and share the same responsibilities equally in terms of *actual cultivation and practice, propagation of the Dharma, and spreading of the Dharma*. Considering the uniqueness of gender identity in the *bhikṣuṇīs*, Master Taixu felt that the *bhikṣuṇīs* were more suitable to lead women in society to achieve the purification of public morals and the propagation of the Dharma. At the same time, in view of the rapid development of modern society, Master Taixu also encouraged the *bhikṣuṇīs* to expand their knowledge outside of Buddhism and proactively learn about other aspects of society. This would enable the *bhikṣuṇīs* to resonate with the “trends of contemporary times” and thereby be better able to demonstrate a greater use of Buddhism in the modern era.<sup>8</sup>

As for the female laity, Master Taixu advocated for a Buddhist family and encouraged practitioners to maintain a constant interaction between Buddhist faith and belief and the whole of society through social education. This in turn will allow the Buddha’s teachings to carry on in this new era. He emphasized that women who stay at home should also proactively seek employment and political rights. This would give women an affirmation in terms of their dignity and moral emotions. Master Taixu especially emphasized the study of the English language and Chinese and Western medicine for women at home, and he even encouraged them to travel overseas to spread the Dharma.

Given the prestige of Master Taixu in the sphere of Humanistic Buddhism, his advocacy for gender equality and the promotion of female Buddhist practitioners had a remarkable influence in wider Buddhist sphere during this

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7. Taixu, 〈答朱中翰問（三次十則）〉 in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu*, Volume 29, 332.

8. Taixu, 〈比丘尼之責任〉 in *The Complete Works of Master Taixu*, Volume 26, 300.

period. Guided by Abbess Hengbao, the female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara were distinguished in the fields of Buddhism during the Republican Era due to the encouragement and support of Master Taixu. The female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara reflected upon the root causes of gender inequality through the publication *Dedicated Journal for Female Buddhists*. They explicitly expressed their opinions on gender equality within Buddhism and had extensive discussions concerning pragmatic means to bring about the realization of gender equality in the future.

The female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara highlight the existence of gender inequality within Buddhism, although it is not the original intention of the Buddhist teachings. Instead, gender inequality is largely developed from a prevalent belief that was derived from ancient Indian and Chinese societies, that is, the notion that men are superior to women. This inherent discrimination is also partially due to a misunderstanding of Buddhist texts, taking a surface meaning of the words as the truth. The lack of correct understanding of Buddhist teachings has led to male discrimination against females, and a sense of inferiority among female Buddhist practitioners, and subsequently resulted in the inequality of status between male and female practitioners. Additionally, the prolonged structural problems existing within traditional Buddhism at that time, such as bureaucracies, decentralization, and temple property being controlled by a minority of monks, et cetera,<sup>9</sup> all further exacerbated the inferior status of female practitioners and thereby hindered women from prevailing in Buddhist studies and practice.

Through reflecting upon the root causes of inequality, female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara advocated for gender equality based on the fundamental teachings of buddha-nature and emptiness. Being a critical component of society, Buddhism should closely interact with the social trend<sup>10</sup> of increasing gender equality in all aspects of society, and should actively promote the attainment of gender equality.

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9. Tiantong, "The virtues and cultivations that bhikkhunī should have" in 《佛教女眾》 Volume 1, no. 1, 1937, 71-72.

10. Hengbao, 〈佛教女性觀〉 in 《佛教女眾》 Volume 1, no. 1, 1937, 24.

In order to protect their status in the long term, female practitioners need to transcend the gender inequality that has been imposed upon them and create the causes that generate an equal status to male practitioners. This need to promote gender equality in Buddhism is inevitable. The female Buddhists of the Pure Bodhi Vihara exemplify the reforms required for the promotion of gender equality by having the courage to take the initiative of removing their own shortcomings. These reforms are guided by three ground rules:<sup>11</sup>

To ensure the rigorous compliance of upholding precepts through strict entrance selection.

To preach the Dharma by in-depth study of Buddhist teachings.

To maintain the long-term development of the monastic community through engaging in self-sustaining financial activities.

As a result of the structural, educational, and financial reforms, female practitioners managed to eradicate historical biases, pursued gender equality, and remarkably improved the status of female practitioners.

## 2. Gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan

After 1949, a large number of pioneers in the Humanistic Buddhism movement, including Venerable Dongchu, Venerable Cihang, Venerable Master Hsing Yun, and Venerable Master Yin Shun, moved to Taiwan to continue spreading Humanistic Buddhism. Thanks to the unique cultural environment in Taiwanese society, many senior monks and venerable masters were able to lead the fourfold community, and greatly furthered the development of Humanistic Buddhism because of this. In terms of building temples, places for cultivation, training Buddhist professionals, propagating the Dharma, promoting Buddhist beliefs and, sponsoring charity, Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan has achieved outstanding advancement. All this has had a very positive influence on promoting Buddhist beliefs in Taiwan, the region around Taiwan, and even throughout the world.

With the continuous improvement of Taiwan's social development towards modernization, the ideas of pursuing women's liberation and gender equality

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11. Hengbao, 〈佛教女性觀〉 in 《佛教女眾》 Volume 1, no. 1, 1937, 24-25.

have also risen among the populace. This general trend has also deeply affected Humanistic Buddhism within Taiwan. In the overall development of Taiwan's Humanistic Buddhism, the issue of how to properly deal with the relationship between genders has always been a common concern among Buddhist leaders. For a long time, in the form of writings and actual practice, these leaders have developed a set of concepts around gender equality that conforms with mainstream values of gender equality in contemporary society, and these concepts do not conflict with fundamental concepts in Buddhism. These ideas not only solved many real-world problems concerning women in Buddhism, in terms of both theory and practice, but also laid the conceptual foundation for the unity and balanced development of male and female Buddhist practitioners in Taiwan. If Master Taixu and associated female Buddhist practitioners can be considered the instigators of the first peak of feminist thought in Humanistic Buddhism during the Republican Era, then the religious leaders of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan created the second crest of feminist thinking.

Among these Buddhist leaders, one of the most renowned is Venerable Master Hsing Yun. As the founder of Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan, Venerable Master Hsing Yun “is not only an excellent promoter of contemporary Humanistic Buddhism, but also an outstanding creator of contemporary Humanistic Buddhism.”<sup>12</sup> In his lifetime spreading and practicing Humanistic Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has consistently adhered to the concept of gender equality, he has fully recognized women's ability and virtue, and has constantly uplifted women's status in both theory and practice. Before moving to Taiwan, Venerable Master Hsing Yun already had some thoughts on gender relations in the Buddhist community. In his early publications on economic development in Buddhism, he pointed out that Buddhist men and women have equal abilities in economic work. At the same time, he recognized the innate differences between men's masculinity and women's femininity, and has suggested that men and women should play different roles in specific economic

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12. Cheng Gongrang, *Research on Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Humanistic Buddhism* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Publications, 2014), 88.



tasks.<sup>13</sup> After moving to Taiwan, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's ideas about gender equality gradually matured over a long period of in-depth theoretical research and practice of the Dharma. These ideas were incorporated into the life and culture of the Buddhist community at Fo Guang Shan. This has significantly contributed to the prosperity of Fo Guang Shan's Humanistic Buddhism throughout the world.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's thoughts about gender equality can be summarized into two aspects, one of theory and another of practice. Firstly, on the theoretical view, based on the fundamental concepts of Buddhism, through his personal writings, Venerable Master Hsing Yun made a modern interpretation of traditional sūtras, and concluded that Buddhism has upheld gender equality from its inception. He pointed out that: "Equality is the truth of the universe and humanity, the central doctrine of the human world, and the root of the Dharma."<sup>14</sup> In the relationship between the two genders, Buddhism itself is also "equal to everyone regardless of men, women and children."<sup>15</sup> Venerable Master Hsing Yun believes that in Dharma practice, women have the same ability and potential as men, and



The contributions of Fo Guang Shan, particularly by its Buddhist nuns, to the propagation of Buddhism are noteworthy. Photo from the 2016 Fo Guang Shan International Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony. (Photo by Ven. Ru Di)

13. Jin Chue (a pen name of Venerable Master Hsing Yun), "The Construction of an Ideal Temple Economy," *Awaken the Masses Weekly* 20 (25 November 1946), 14.
14. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism Series: Contemporary Questions Symposium* vol. 1 (Taipei: Gandha Samudra Culture Company, 2008), 319.
15. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *National Master Yulin* (Shanghai: Shanghai Splendid Article Press, 2010), 58-59.

argues that: “As long as there is compassion, as long as there is a will, regardless of gender, regardless of origin, there is a hope for success.”<sup>16</sup> He advocates that Buddhists should not view the two genders differently or focus on the gender of a person, let alone use this as a basis to discriminate against others. Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s thoughts on gender equality have cleared the theoretical obstacles for the elevation of women’s status and for achieving gender equality in Buddhism.

Secondly, in regard to the practical aspect, because Venerable Master Hsing Yun has dedicated himself to the development of Humanistic Buddhism, he has always paid great attention to training female practitioners in Buddhist education. In promoting the Dharma, he has encouraged women to take positions of responsibility, has given women sufficient support, and has helped women to realise their full potential to achieve no less than men. In addition, Venerable Master Hsing Yun has collaborated with the international Buddhist community to restore the dual ordination system for *bhikṣuṇīs* in Southern Buddhist countries such as India and Sri Lanka, which has led to the establishment of local *bhikṣuṇī* communities; he has also convened the World Conference on Outstanding Women. These efforts have effectively contributed to the improvement of Buddhist women’s status.

Another highly distinguished scholar who made significant contributions in the field of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism is Master Yin Shun. In the book, *Introduction to Buddhism*, which was published in his early years, Master Yin Shun clearly put forward the idea, “in regard to faith, virtue, and wisdom, there is no difference in Buddhism between men and women.” He also pointed out the fact that traditional Buddhism has been, for a long time, “unable to propagate Buddhism in the spirit of equality between men and women, not supportive of women, unwilling to elevate the status of women, but instead has tended to be patriarchal, even abandoning women, and having aversion towards women.” His opinion was that, “this is really a distortion of Buddhism.”<sup>17</sup> These

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16. Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Lecture Series 2* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Publications, 1984), 837.

17. Yinshun, *Introduction to Buddhism*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Publishing House), 2010, 116.



Master Yin Shun

quotations show that Master Yin Shun was a staunch activist for gender equality from very early on. He believed that the intent of Buddhism is absolute equality of women and men in terms of ability, accomplishments, rights, obligations, cultivation, and propagation of the Dharma. This is the original intent of Buddhism; it is a deeper manifestation of the spirit of equality in Buddhism. Based on his firm stance of advocating gender equality in Buddhism, Master Yin Shun further pointed out, through his profound understanding of Buddhism and his rigorous and rational arguments, that the reason there was a long-standing patriarchal phenomenon in Buddhism—in addition to the influence of social norms—was the distortion and misunderstanding of the Buddhists themselves.

Regarding the statement that *bhikṣuṇīs* led to the premature decline of Buddhism that was recorded in some sūtras, Master Yin Shun believed that although the Buddha did have some hesitations initially, his attitude did in fact change, and he eventually supported the *bhikṣuṇīs*. This apparent contradiction concerning the Buddha's original intent as recorded in the sūtras arose during the first Buddhist council (the council of five hundred [*arhats*] at Rājagṛha). Mahākāśyapa, who had an aversion towards women, had a great influence because he convened the council. Master Yin Shun also did not believe the eight *garudhammas* [precepts of “respect” specifically for *bhikṣuṇīs*],” that severely suppress the status of women, originated from the Buddha. After careful investigation, Master Yin Shun pointed out that in the eight *garudhammas*: “Full ordination must be made in the presence of the Vārṣagaṇya...request for instruction must be made from the bhikṣú community and a request for *upoṣadha* every half-month...one must reside with the Vārṣagaṇya (during the rainy season retreat) ...after the retreat, a *pravāraṇā* must be performed in the presence of the Vārṣagaṇya.” These four rules originated from the Buddha to educate and protect the *bhikṣuṇīs* after ordination. “The intention was to inspire

and motivate, not to belittle or to suppress.”<sup>18</sup> Other rules, such as “even a nun ordained for a hundred years must pay respect to a monk, even if he was just ordained that day...not to admonish bhikṣú...not to cite the wrongdoing committed by the bhikṣú,” and so forth were added “after the Buddha entered *nirvāṇa*,” by “Mahākāśyapa and other senior bhikṣús,” due to “adverse sentiment towards the *bhikṣuṇīs*.”<sup>19</sup>

Master Yin Shun’s advocacy of gender equality and deep analysis of Buddhism’s historical issues cleared the constraints for women in Humanistic Buddhism, helped women to re-establish their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness, and revitalized their energy for a new beginning. The rapid rise of Taiwanese Buddhist women also justifies Master Yin Shun’s thinking on gender equality in the current era.

As the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, Master Sheng Yen also explicitly advocated for gender equality. Master Sheng Yen made a profound reflection on the status of gender issues in Buddhism. He did not shy away from pointing out that there has been a strong patriarchal emphasis within Buddhism for a long time. This phenomenon directly led to the long-term suppression of Buddhist women’s groups, and in the long run also hindered the overall development of Buddhism. Master Sheng Yen definitively pointed out: “During the Buddha’s era, he advocated equality between men and women.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the phenomenon of patriarchalism in Buddhism essentially violated the fundamental spirit of Buddha’s advocacy of gender equality. Based on serious concerns regarding this issue, Master Sheng Yen held that Buddhism could not continue its traditional discrimination towards women, but rather needed to return to the original intents of the Buddha, promote gender equality from within, and bring the two genders, Buddhist men and women, back to the path of balanced development.

Along the lines of Master Yin Shun, Master Sheng Yen also opposed the

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18. Yinshun, *The Origin and Development of Early Mahayana Buddhism*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Publishing House), 2011, 169.

19. *Id.*, 167.

20. Master Sheng Yen, “View on Future Female Buddhist Practitioners,” in *Knowing the Path of Learning Buddhism* (Beijing: Hua Xia Publishing Co, Ltd., 2010), 181.

*garudhammas* because they result in the gender inequality within Buddhism. Master Sheng Yen highlighted that the *garudhammas* were first proposed only after the Buddha entered *nirvāṇa* and are contradictory to the essence of the Dharma and the guiding principles of the precepts.<sup>21</sup> He stated that the existence of the *garudhammas* leads to the loss of independence for the *bhikṣuṇīs* and an inferior status to male practitioners.<sup>22</sup> In order to remove the barriers for the *bhikṣuṇīs*, Master Sheng Yen proposed to discard the *garudhammas*, and he discouraged the practice by future *bhikṣuṇīs*. Master Sheng Yen further clarified the misperception from some of the Buddhist texts that female practitioners are unable to attain Buddhahood due to gender inferiority.<sup>23</sup> He quoted the “dragon-maiden who became a Buddha” from the *Lotus Sūtra* to defend gender equality from within the sūtras.<sup>24</sup> He also remarked that as long as female Buddhist practitioners accumulate sufficient merit, then they too can attain Buddhahood as swiftly as their male counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

Master Sheng Yen emphasized independence as a prerequisite to achieving gender equality. However, although many temples in Taiwan have practitioners of both genders, monks predominantly take the lead and make daily decisions. Master Sheng Yen believed such circumstances will inevitably lead to *bhikṣuṇīs* passively accepting management by the monks, with a corresponding loss of independence as the long term consequence. He expressed his hopes for a future in which *bhikṣuṇīs* will establish a *bhikṣuṇīs*-only community,<sup>26</sup> with a nun as the resident teacher to follow and companion *bhikṣuṇīs* to practice with.<sup>27</sup> Not only would this structure adhere to the guiding principles of the precepts, it would also foster the independence of female practitioners.

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21. *Id.*, 187.

22. *Id.*, 185.

23. *Madhyama Āgama, Saṅghadeva* trans., T. 28, 1:607. See also *Ekottara Āgama, Saṅghadeva* trans., T. 38, 2:757.

24. Master Sheng Yen, “View on Future Female Buddhist Practitioners,” in *Knowing the Path of Learning Buddhism* (Beijing: Hua Xia Publishing Co, Ltd., 2010), 187.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*



Venerable Chao-hwei, a Taiwanese Buddhist nun, courageously fights for the equality of women in Buddhism.

While the Humanistic Buddhist community in Taiwan has promoted the idea of gender equality, traditional Buddhists in Taiwan have not kept pace with this trend, and even somehow regressed in terms of ideology. In the 1990s, articles published in newspapers and magazines by some Buddhist practitioners criticized Taiwan's *bhikṣuṇīs*, stating that they “don't know what the *garudhammas*

are.”<sup>28</sup> Some even explicitly demanded “*bhikṣuṇīs* in Taiwan to study the *Mahaprajapati Bhikkhuni Sūtra*, to recite the eighty-four characteristics, and to study the *garudhammas*.”<sup>29</sup> In the face of this “countercurrent” of rejecting the idea of gender equality in Buddhism, by means of defending the *garudhammas*, Venerable Chao-hwei, the “female general in Buddhism” from the Humanistic Buddhist community, bravely stepped onto the front stage and launched a decade-long ideological debate. She pushed the gender equality movement to a climax by means of publicly tearing up a copy of the *garudhammas*.

28. Chan Ni (a pen name meaning “Nun of Repentance”), “The Understanding and Practice of the Eight Garudhammas” in *Sangha Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1992), quoted from Shih Chao-hwei’s reply: “On the Ethics of the Two Groups: Commentary on Chan Ni’s ‘The Understanding and Practice of the Eight Garudhammas’” in *Intonation for Thousands of Years: Buddhist Feminist Thought for the New Century*, ed. By Shih Chao-hwei and Shih Shing-kuang (Taipei: Dharma Realm Publishing, 2002), 58.

29. Chueh Jen, “A Proposal to Complete the Monastic Education System” in *Sangha Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1992), quoted from Shih Chao-hwei’s “‘Slave Education’ Give it a Rest!” in *Intonation for Thousands of Years: Buddhist Feminist Thought for the New Century*, ed. By Shih Chao-hwei and Shih Shing-kuang (Taipei: Dharma Realm Publishing, 2002), 70.

In this long-term ideological debate, Venerable Chao-hwei “took many lecturing and writing opportunities, using academic analysis and document interpretation.”<sup>30</sup> Venerable Chao-hwei also thoroughly and comprehensively reviewed the viewpoints and remarks used for discriminating against women within Buddhism, such as the *garudhammas*, “ordaining women will lead to a premature decline of the Dharma,” that “eighty-four ugly features of women,” and “women have five obstacles,” etc.

On the basis of previous ideological achievements and a deep concern for the outcome of Buddhist women, Venerable Chao-hwei studied Buddhist doctrines in combination with her own experience in practicing the Dharma. Venerable Chao-hwei analyzed the historical root causes of gender inequality in Buddhism, using rational methodologies including research of primary source texts, interpreting this literature and doctrinal analysis. With continuous exploration, based on the fundamental principle of the Dharma that “all lives are equal,” she successfully demonstrated that gender equality has been a fundamental aspect of Buddhism since ancient times. She pointed out that many statements in the scriptures that discriminated against women were not derived from the Buddha’s teachings. In fact, she asserted these were serious misrepresentations of the Buddha’s true meaning. Therefore, strictly speaking, such statements are incorrect. Venerable Chao-hwei’s endeavors in this field have successfully disputed many viewpoints associated with gender inequality in Buddhism. She achieved her goal to defeat male chauvinism within the Buddhist community, and subsequently demonstrated to those who opposed gender equality that an argument supporting inequality based on a fundamental theoretical foundation is not valid.

After making sufficient theoretical preparation, at the opening ceremony of the “Symposium on Theory and Practice of Master Yin Shun’s Thoughts” on March 31, 2001, Venerable Chao-hwei made a public speech, and titled the “Second Revolution of Contemporary Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī—Abolishing the

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30. Shih Chao-hwei, “Buddhism and Women: Deconstructing Buddhist Male Chauvinism,” in *In-tonation for Thousands of Years: Buddhist Feminist Thought for the New Century*, ed. By Shih Chao-hwei and Shih Shing-kuang (Taipei: Dharma Realm Publishing, 2002), 5.

*Garudhammas*.” She then led the four groups of Buddhist followers to “tear off” the *garudhammas* from the wall in a ceremonial and symbolic manner. In the ten-year movement for gender equality, Venerable Chao-hwei completed the theoretical decomposition of the remarks discriminating against women in the Buddhist scriptures, and in practice, publicly abolished the *garudhammas*. Although her behavior is still considered to be controversial, in reality, Venerable Chao-hwei has always been at the forefront of promoting the idea of gender equality in Buddhism, both in theory and in practice.

### **3. Humanistic Buddhism’s philosophy of gender equality in today’s Mainland China**

From 1949 until the end of the 1970s, Buddhism in Mainland China was “akin to a little boat adrift at sea,” and in the midst of social and political movements of socialist reforms and the Cultural Revolution, “withered in its struggles.”<sup>31</sup> It was not until 1978, after the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, that Chinese Buddhism commenced its gradual recovery. After 40 years of rapid development, Humanistic Buddhism has achieved much in the region. During this period, due to the sustained excellent conditions for religion in post-revolution China, and its consistent emphasis and support for gender equality, participation of female Buddhists in China has rapidly developed. At the same time, Buddhism globally also made great progress in terms of elevating the status of females and promoting gender equality, and therefore the position of female Buddhists has also been significantly uplifted.

In this respect, Venerable Long Lian, praised by Zhao Puchu as the “foremost amongst today’s *bhikṣuṇīs*,”<sup>32</sup> has undoubtedly contributed the most to gender equality in Mainland China’s Humanistic Buddhism.

Born into a family of traditional intellectuals with an extreme discrimination against females, Venerable Long Lian’s father “did not even give

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31. Yu Xue, *The Socialist Transformation of Chinese Buddhism* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2015), 607.

32. 「當代第一比丘尼」-Ed.



proper thought to her name,”<sup>33</sup> despite being his eldest daughter. Only after the births of her five younger brothers did he officially name them all according to the Nine Provinces of ancient China. When she was older, Venerable Long Lian disapproved of her father’s male-favoritism and “named herself Ming Yan to express her dissatisfaction.”<sup>34,35</sup> During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Youzhou, which was part of the Nine Provinces, belonged to the state of Yan. In naming herself “Yan,” Venerable Long Lian was implying that she stood for “You”<sup>36</sup> among the provinces—in an attempt to fight for the same treatment as her brothers. As she entered adulthood, and as her life and social experience increased, Venerable Long Lian realized that regardless of a woman’s accomplishments before marriage, she would inevitably become “the same as all other women—without social status or independence,”<sup>37,38</sup> after marriage and giving birth to children. In order to express her protest against the miserable fate of women in a patriarchal society, and to obtain and protect her independence and integrity (gained after many difficulties), Venerable Long Lian vowed not to get married.

If we are to understand Venerable Long Lian’s self-naming as a means to fight for gender equality within the family, then her rejection of marriage was a fight for equality in society. We can therefore tell that Venerable Long Lian, as a member of a very small group of female intellectuals, possessed a strong sense of gender consciousness even before she renounced. She strongly expressed her critique of gender inequality in a patriarchal society, and took practical action towards promoting women’s independence, protecting women’s integrity, and

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33. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today’s Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 32.

34. 「為了表示自己的不滿，為自己取了一個名字：銘燕」-Ed.

35. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today’s Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 33.

36. This is homophonous with the word 優, which directly translates to “being superior to.” -Ed.

37. 「和別的女人一樣，沒有地位，沒有獨立人格」-Ed.

38. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today’s Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 225.

achieving the ideal of gender equality.

After Venerable Long Lian's renunciation, she recognized that there were "hierarchical differences between the two genders in Buddhism," which she thought was a reflection of "male dominance over women in the secular world."<sup>39,40</sup> At the same time, she disapproved of the women's five hindrances and the *garudhammas* found in Buddhist scriptures. As a result, Venerable Long Lian spent her life particularly concerned with how to elevate women's status in Buddhism, given the existing conditions, and how to actualize gender equality. Due to the differences in social conditions between China and Taiwan, Venerable Long Lian did not overly engage in theoretical discussions on gender equality based on Buddhist teachings as the leaders of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan did, but instead focused on practicalities such as the development of skills among *bhikṣuṇīs* and reinstating the precepts for *bhikṣuṇīs* from the Twofold Saṅgha. In doing so, she showed that the abilities and achievements of *bhikṣuṇīs* are irrefutably equal to that of *bhikkhus*, thereby objectively elevating the position of the *bhikṣuṇīs* in Han Buddhism, and making outstanding contributions towards women's status in modern Chinese Buddhism.

Even before 1980, China already had several Buddhist colleges. However, these colleges only admitted male monastics, and "none offered education to *bhikṣuṇīs*."<sup>41</sup> In order to make up for this inadequacy, so that female monastics can obtain a Buddhist education of the same quality as male monastics, and further cultivating the talents of women, Chinese Buddhism very much needed to establish a Buddhist college for female monastics. Given these pressing needs, Venerable Long Lian expressed that it was her "responsibility to do this."<sup>42</sup> In 1980 when she attended the 4th National Representative Conference of the BAC, Venerable Long Lian "solemnly proposed to establish a *bhikṣuṇī*

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39. 「佛教中的男女確有一個高下之分」，她認為這是「世俗間的男尊女卑」在佛教兩性倫理中的必然反映。-Ed.

40. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today's Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 220.

41. *Id.*, 221.

42. *Id.*, 221.



Zhao Puchu (2<sup>nd</sup> row, 4<sup>th</sup> from the left), with Venerable Long Lian to his right, inspects Tiexiang Si for the establishment of the Sichuan Buddhist Institute.

Buddhist college” to the Buddhist Association of China.<sup>43</sup> This was met with strong support from then President Zhao Puchu, and after overcoming many difficulties, was approved by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The Sichuan Buddhist Institute was thereby founded, and enrolled its first batch of students in 1984. After the institute’s establishment, Venerable Long Lian assumed the position as dean, personally overseeing its educational activities, and devoted the rest of her life to female monastic education, nurturing many virtuous and learned *bhikṣuṇīs* for Buddhism in Mainland China.

Put simply, the undertaking of the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts from the Twofold Saṅgha refers to female monastics, in the process of undertaking the full precepts, first obtaining the *benfa ni*<sup>44</sup> precepts from ten *bhikṣuṇīs* who have upheld the precepts for twelve years, and then, led by these ten *bhikṣuṇīs* to the *bhikkhus*, seeking ten *bhikkhus* to form an ordination platform to pass the preceptees to full *bhikṣuṇī* precepts. Only then is such a procedure in line with

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43. *Id.*, 160-1.

44. 「本法尼」-Ed.

Buddhist liturgy. In Chinese Han Buddhism, the practice of taking the precepts from the Twofold Saṅgha can be earliest traced to the Song of the Southern dynasties, and the tradition had been discontinued by the time of the Republican Era. As early as 1949, Venerable Long Lian's teacher, Venerable Neng Hai, made preparations to reinstate the Twofold Saṅgha precepts, but could not put it into practice due to various reasons. As such, Venerable Long Lian "always hoped that she could someday complete Venerable Neng Hai's unfinished aspirations."<sup>45</sup>

It was in 1980 that Venerable Long Lian formally expressed her aspiration to "reinstate the Twofold Saṅgha ordination for *bhikṣuṇīs* in Mainland China" at the 4th National Representative Conference of the BAC.<sup>46</sup> This matter was highly regarded by the Buddhist Association of China, and Zhao Puchu actively worked towards it. It was due to the joint effort of Venerable Long Lian and the Buddhist Association of China, and together with the former's planning and coordination that the Twofold Saṅgha ordination was held two years later. In January 1982, ten *bhikṣuṇīs* brought together by Venerable Long Lian "transmitted the *benfa ni* precepts to eight individuals at Tiexiang Si,<sup>47</sup> after which they were brought to the Manjusri Temple at Chengdu, where Venerable Kuan Lin headed a ten-*bhikkhu* preceptor group to transmit to them the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts."<sup>48</sup> In the years that followed, Venerable Long Lian continued to overcome many difficulties to organize eight more such ordinations in 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993 (twice), 1995, 1999 and 2003. Worthy of particular mention is the 1993 ordination transmitted at White Horse Temple in Luoyang, where Venerable Long Lian transmitted the Twofold Saṅgha precepts to almost four hundred female preceptees. In terms of its scale, it became known as "unique

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45. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today's Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 183.

46. Jinyu Wen, "The Shadow Befalls the Foremost Peak of Ermei: Lamenting the Passing of the Renowned Venerable Long Lian," *Journal of Chinese Religion* 12: 21.

47. 鐵像寺 -Ed.

48. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today's Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 185.

in the history of Buddhism.”<sup>49</sup> Since then, the tradition of the Twofold Saṅgha ordination, which has been broken several times in the history of Chinese Han Buddhism, was fully reinstated because of the untiring efforts of Venerable Long Lian and others. This not only helped the tradition of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination return “back to its proper standards,”<sup>50</sup> but furthermore, it is also “of immense significance to the building of a systematic modern Chinese Buddhism.”<sup>51</sup> It can be said that Venerable Long Lian’s contributions towards the reinstatement and continuation of the *bhikṣuṇī* tradition’s legality in Chinese Han Buddhism are indeed meritorious and great.

#### 4. Conclusion

The overall concept of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism can be assessed from two aspects: theory and practice. From a theoretical level, the concept of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism mainly seeks support from the Buddhist doctrines (especially the concepts of buddha-nature and emptiness). At the same time, when addressing the discriminatory remarks toward women as noted in the sūtras, Humanistic Buddhists have been able to conduct a rational analysis and doctrinal deconstruction to free female Buddhist practitioners from the theoretical constraints. From a practical level, the concept of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism is primarily demonstrated by encouraging female practitioners to actively participate in Buddhist careers and take ownership of Buddhism. Especially in Taiwan, the female community has already progressed to become a core authority in Humanistic Buddhism, and has become indispensable in driving the development of Humanistic Buddhism to excellence. In Mainland China, through the promotion of education and restoration of the precepts for the two monastic assemblies (*bhikkhu* and

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49. Yixiong Wei, “Long Lian: The Gifted Woman of Buddhism,” *Journal of Literature and History* 2 (2002): 15.

50. Shanshan Qiu, *Foremost among Today’s Bhikṣuṇīs – The Biography of Venerable Long Lian* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Press, 2007), 186.

51. Jinyu Wen, “The Shadow Befalls the Foremost Peak of Ermei: Lamenting the Passing of the Renowned Venerable Long Lian,” *Journal of Chinese Religion* 12: 21.

*bhikṣuṇī*), Humanistic Buddhism has been instrumental in the expansion of the women's community in sheer volume. Furthermore, it has promoted quality in women's Buddhist studies, enhanced recognition of women's identity, and taken practical steps, one by one, to achieve a significant rise in the status of women.

Comparatively speaking, although the idea of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism was just beginning during the Republican Era, it still laid the basic layout of how the overall development should be spearheaded. In the later phase, the idea of gender equality in Taiwan and the Mainland followed this directive and went deeper and wider. Taiwanese benefited from the strong rise of Buddhist women's groups. It was a turning point and an opportunity to establish an ideological character for Humanistic Buddhism. In order to stimulate the participation and awareness of women, the concept of gender equality was promoted further, with a more open, inclusive, and encouraging attitude. With the continuous development of Buddhist women, the idea of gender equality became a general consensus within Buddhism. With the positive interaction between these two influences, gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism has become a benchmark for Buddhists around the world. Due to the differences in the degree of social modernization and the degree of self-development, Mainland China shows greater emphasis on the practical implementation of the idea of gender equality in Humanistic Buddhism, yet a weaker focus on the theory.

On the whole, looking at the development of Humanistic Buddhism in the past one hundred years on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, at the advocated protection of women's rights and benefits, increase in women's status, and finally the achievement of full equality between men and women, gender equality has gradually evolved into a general consensus within Buddhism. It has become a key component in the principles of Humanistic Buddhism. The continuous development and progress of the idea of gender equality will not only promote the balance of status between men and women within Humanistic Buddhism, but will also provide important support for the overall development of Humanistic Buddhism in the future.

