

# Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka

A critique of the feminist perspective

Wei-Yi Cheng

# BUDDHIST NUNS IN TAIWAN AND SRI LANKA

This book is a comparative study of Buddhist nuns in contemporary Taiwan and Sri Lanka. The author explores the postcolonial background and its influence on the contemporary situation, as well as surveying the main historical, economic, social and other factors bearing upon the position of nuns in society. Based on original research, in which nuns were questioned about their perspective, various controversial issues concerning the status of women in Buddhism are exposed. These include allegedly misogynist teachings relating to women's inferior karma, that they cannot become Buddhas, and that nuns have to follow additional rules which monks do not. This book makes an important contribution to the study of women in Buddhism by focusing both on nuns from both of the main wings of Buddhism (Theravāda and Mahayana) and from different Asian countries.

**Wei-Yi Cheng** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, Taiwan. Her research interests include the Feminist study of Religions, Women in Buddhism, Buddhism in Taiwan, Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Postcolonialism.

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*Wei-Yi Cheng*

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

In the sixth year of Yuanjia, a foreign ship owner named Nanti brought a group of *bhikkhunī* from Lion Kingdom. The nuns lodged at Jingfu Temple at the capital of Song. Later, they asked [Chinese] nun Sengguo: ‘Has any foreign nun come to your country?’ She answered no. They again asked, ‘How could, then, [Chinese] nuns obtain higher ordination from two sections of sangha?’ Sengguo answered: ‘We obtained higher ordination from the *bhikkhu* sangha. Those who are advanced [in knowledge and/or spiritual practice] might give ordination, for it is to be a skillful means to rouse respect in the minds of people. Such are the cases of Mahāpajāptī gaining ordination from her acceptance of the Eight Special Rules and the five hundred Sākya women obtaining ordination with Mahāpajāptī as their preceptor. We follow their examples.’ Although Sengguo answered as such, she still had doubts. She later consulted [Kashmir monk] Gunavarman who gave the same explanation. Sengguo consulted him again on whether it was permissible to obtain higher ordination for a second time. Gunavarman answered that since *sīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā* must be developed from the lower stage to the higher stage, it is helpful to obtain a second higher ordination. In the tenth year of Yuanjia, ship owner Nanti brought another eleven nuns, including nun Tiesaluo, from Lion Kingdom. The nuns from Lion Kingdom who had arrived earlier had learnt the language of Song. Higher ordination was requested and the ordination platform was erected at Nanlin Temple. More than three hundred [Chinese] nuns obtained a second higher ordination in the following year.

‘Guangling Sengguo ni zhuan’, *Biqiuni zhuan* (T50)  
(‘Biography of nun Sengguo of Guangling’,  
*Biographies of Bhikkhunī*)<sup>1</sup>

The sixth year of Yuanjia is said to be 429 C.E. and Lion Kingdom a Sri Lankan kingdom (see H. Goonatilake, 1988: 40–46). The Sri Lankan

*bhikkhunī* mentioned in the biography bravely faced the danger of the sea and the long journey and traveled to China to give *bhikkhunī* ordination. These Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* are the beginning of the story for this research, for this research is a comparative study of Buddhist nuns in contemporary Sri Lanka and Taiwan. As will be shown in Chapter 2, had these Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* never traveled to China to transmit *bhikkhunī* ordination, this research would have never taken place, for neither the *bhikkhunī* lineages in Taiwan nor even that in Sri Lanka would be in existence today.

This research arises from a sense of alienation that I often feel towards Western feminist discourse on Buddhism. Although many Western feminist works are inspiration to me, from time to time, I find that Western feminist works do not necessarily speak to my experience as an Asian Buddhist woman. In order to provide a bridge between feminist agitation and the reality of Buddhist women, I set the purpose of this research as to explore factors that affect the welfare of Buddhist nuns. Even though I wish to study Buddhist women in general, a research as such might be too broad in scope. Thus, I focus on the study of Buddhist nuns only. To do so, I focus on a comparative study of Buddhist nuns in contemporary Sri Lanka and contemporary Taiwan. Hopefully, through a comparison, those factors might become more apparent than by studying a single tradition in isolation.

The choice of Sri Lankan and Taiwanese nuns for the research was for both academic and personal reasons. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, one of the key figures in the Sakyadhita (International Association of Buddhist Women) movement, praises the Buddhist nuns' order in Taiwan as 'the success story' (1999a: 19), because in many ways the Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' order seems to embody prosperity and high achievement. Thus, a comparison between the Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' order and another Buddhist nuns' order might reveal factors that influence the welfare of Buddhist nuns. Adding to the fact that I am Taiwanese and there is no language barrier to worry about, the choice of the Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' order as one of the comparison subjects seems natural. Having chosen the Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' order as one of the research subjects, the next question was which other Buddhist nuns' order should be chosen for the comparison. As recorded in Karma Lekshe Tsomo's account, the Buddhist nuns' order in Sri Lanka has been going through great changes in recent years as the result of the feminist struggle to reestablish the *bhikkhunī* order in the country (1999a: 11–13). Therefore a study of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka might not only bear witness to the unfolding changes but also reveal elements that Buddhist nuns themselves deem important to keep, or negative or neutral enough to abandon, during the process of reestablishing the *bhikkhunī* order. The historical link between Buddhist nuns' orders in Sri Lanka and Taiwan, as described earlier, certainly contributed to my choice of Sri Lankan nuns for the study. But this choice also had a personal dimension. On a previous pilgrimage trip to Sri Lanka some years ago, I fell in love with the beauty of

the island and wished to learn more about Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Hence, for both academic and personal reasons, I chose Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns for the comparative study.

The inspiration for this research might be literally traced back to two books: *Buddhism After Patriarchy: a feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism* by Rita Gross (1993) and *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: realizations* edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1999a). Both books will be discussed later in this chapter. I will first discuss the Western ‘discovery’ of Buddhism, even though Buddhism had existed prior to the Western ‘discovery’, because it forms an important backbone to the appearances of previous works. Then I will move on to the discussion of my research aims. For this research is inspired by Western feminist critiques on Buddhism and yet, this research is also a rethinking about Western feminism, reflecting what I see as its shortcomings when confronted with the reality of Buddhist women. The term ‘Western feminism’ is a generalized term and probably should be avoided because it fails to give an adequate picture of the complexity of Western society (e.g. variances in class, race, nations, subculture, sexual orientation, etc.). Additionally, since I am only able to access English-language materials, the term ‘Western feminism’ in this chapter actually refers to feminist literatures written in English and mostly published in the UK or USA, rather than a broader range of literatures published in the Western world. However, because of the general introductory scope of this chapter, I will continue to use generalized terms such as ‘Western Buddhism’ or ‘Western feminism’. In the subsequent chapters, I will specify, for example, which Western feminist writer I refer to in order to avoid further generalization.

### **Western discovery of Buddhism**

Western study of Buddhism largely originated in Orientalism, and to some extent, Western academic/feminist study of Buddhism is still patterned by its Orientalist origins. In order to understand the shortcomings in the Western feminist critique of Buddhism, it is necessary to understand the patterns of Western study of Buddhism, because many of the shortcomings have their roots in Orientalism.

It might be argued that a more comprehensive learning of Buddhism by the Europeans, who were situated geographically distant from Buddhist Asia, required better communication and transportation between the two continents. Thus, it is understandable that European learning of Buddhism intensified with European expansion of trade, military power and colonialism of the modern time, as traveling and communication between Europe and Asia became frequent. European expansion also gave rise to and coincided with Orientalism. According to Said, the purpose or content of Orientalist discourse is to represent the imbalance of power between

imperialist Europe and Asia, showing the superiority of the West rather than discussing knowledge about the East (1978: 12).

Although the focus of Said's study is the Middle East rather than Eastern Asia or Southeast Asia where Buddhism prevails, one can still find examples of Orientalist discourse of Buddhism serving agendas other than genuine learning. This is perhaps best exemplified in, and in turn reflects, the upheaval of the Christian missionaries' learning of Buddhism, in the way that their inquiry about Buddhism is often for the purpose of countering Buddhist teachings and spreading Christianity rather than a pursuit of cross-cultural understandings (see, for example, Batchelor 1994: 161–195; Fields 1981: 20–25). The nineteenth-century European discourse of Buddhism also saw the agenda of constructing the idea of European superiority (Almond 1988: 33–53).

However, Said's critique on Orientalism has been criticized. For instance, Lopez argues that while the Islamic world 'occupied the space immediately beyond the imaginary border between west and east' and thus appears threatening to the West, the Buddhist world was 'at the ends of the earth' and 'representing no such threat' (1995: 11). Hence, the purpose of Orientalist discourse on Buddhism is not necessarily identical to the Orientalist discourse on the Islamic world, as described in Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In addition, European hegemony over Asia may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Orientalism. That is, according to Clarke, Orientalism was generated by conditions in Europe since the Renaissance, for global expansion, and encounters with non-Judaic-Christian traditions and technological development created an intellectual and spiritual void in Europe that motivated Europeans to seek alternative worldviews to fill this intellectual and spiritual void (1997: 19–34). As such, Western discourse on Buddhism sometimes idealizes and romanticizes Buddhism. One example of this is the tendency in the West to apply Buddhism in psychotherapy and the study of psychology. One may see such a tendency as an idealization and/or romanticization of Buddhism, for identifying Buddhism with psychotherapy/psychology involves a process of selecting Buddhist doctrines and neglecting the ways in which Buddhist teachings are actually lived by the adherents. Idealization/romanticization or not, the Western association of Buddhism with psychotherapy/psychology does not necessarily imply an attempt to dominate the Orient Other, since such an association reflects a self-criticism on the Western part (Clarke 1997: 145–164).

Furthermore, in the religious realm, Said's critique on Orientalism may simplify the distinction between the Western learning of religion as a system of knowledge and the Western learning of the religion as religious belief and practice. For example, echoing Said's view on Orientalism, Almond states, 'Through the West's progressive possession of the texts of Buddhism, it becomes, so to say, materially owned by the West; and by virtue of this ownership, ideologically controlled by it' (1988: 24). The problem with

Almond's statement is that throughout history, Buddhism as a religion has always been in constant transformation in order to suit the conditions and needs of the adherents of different times and regions. Western Buddhists are not the first group who attempt to 'ideologically control' Buddhism. Buddhism in China, for example, has changed beyond recognition since its arrival in China during the first century C.E. Chinese Buddhists, too, have shown eagerness to possess Buddhist texts; several of them (e.g. Xuanzang of the seventh century, Yijing of the eighth century) even took up the challenge of journeying to India to obtain Buddhist texts.<sup>2</sup> A similar process of transformation has been taking place in the West. In fact, by the end of the twentieth century, Buddhism may no longer be an object 'out there', as an imaginative Other waiting to be explored during the Victorian period (see Almond 1988: 12–14). Contributors to *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia* (Prebish and Baumann 2002) reveal that Buddhism has become a religious belief and practice embedded in the lives of many Westerners. Given the fact that Western Buddhists face different conditions and needs from their Asian counterparts, the Western transformation of Buddhism is understandable and necessary. Thus, to view any Western transformation of Buddhism as an attempt to dominate the Orient Other runs the risk of simplifying the situation of Buddhism as a form of religion observed by Westerners.

### *Transformation*

One of the goals of this research is to recognize the fact that Asian Buddhism has always undergone transformation, for the reorganization of transformation helps to avoid an East/West and Us/Other binary axis that can still be found in the study of Buddhism. For example, as a Buddhist woman, I find Rita Gross's *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993) inspiring. As an Asian Buddhist woman, however, the occasional East/West, Us/Other binary rhetoric in the book alienates me. To her credit, in her later book, *Feminism and Religion* (1996), Gross calls for attention to cross-cultural study of religion. And in her more recent work, Gross stresses the importance of cross-cultural understanding (2004: 23).

But in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, there seems to be a strong East/West, Us/Other binary rhetoric. The assumption that only Western Buddhists are capable or aware of the need for feminist transformation of Buddhism (e.g. Gross 1993: 25, 218–219) echoes Orientalist rhetoric that subjugates Asian Buddhists. Even non-Asian Buddhists may experience this as a form of US-imperialism. A (white) British feminist Buddhist friend once exclaimed to me, 'I don't feel related to *Buddhism After Patriarchy*; it's too American-centered'. Buddhism is not homogenous, not even in the English-speaking West. The recognition of transformation in Sri Lankan and Taiwanese Buddhism shows the multifarious nature of Buddhism, for it reveals that just as Western Buddhism struggles to adapt to the cultural environment in the

West, Buddhism in Asia also constantly transforms itself in order to meet the new social and cultural conditions.

Furthermore, the recognition of transformation is a reminder that Buddhist women do not live in a *purely* religious context. The belief and practices of Buddhist women are also constantly transforming in order to face constantly changing social, economic and political conditions. The recognition of this transformation helps to see the ways in which Buddhist women adapt/manage to resist the challenges presented by social changes. For instance, on observing women in a rural Sri Lankan village, Risseuw realizes the difficulty of confronting and challenging the privileged, and she comes to appreciate the small actions of resistance that are commonly deployed by rural women but not recognized by most educated, privileged feminists (1988). 'One is taught to become a strategist rather than a struggler', says Risseuw (1988: 287). In other words, feminist discourse must be cautious of the differences among women. After all, Buddhist women do not exist simply as women; they are also embodied with class, racial, national and other identities. Feminist scholars, usually coming from a more privileged background, might overlook the resistance undertaken by women of different backgrounds in the struggle against various types of oppression, including oppressions other than patriarchy. As will be shown in Chapter 2, the lives of Sri Lankan and Taiwanese Buddhist nuns are closely linked with the political, social and economic conditions on the islands. This brings us to the next topic: the demarginalization of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka and Taiwan.

### *Demarginalization*

As Buddhism may be transformed by social, economic and political conditions, the beliefs and practices of Buddhist women might also be transformed accordingly. The aim of demarginalization of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka and Taiwan is to shift the attention from the empirical assumptions about 'sisterhood' in some Western feminist critiques to the complicated reality of Buddhist women across different contexts.

Applying Sharma's suggestion that the position of women in religion might be viewed as a political variable (2000: 174), any emphasis on transformation is intended to take into account the distribution of power not only between men and women, but also across imperial and other power boundaries that erect 'forms of conceptual enclosure and social regulation' (Ashcroft 2001: 182). Imperial boundaries, set by the dominant culture, shape our understanding of 'how things are' (Ashcroft 2001: 182). Having the power of scholarly language, feminist scholars are in a privileged position to speak out on issues. Thus, feminist discourse on religion may unintentionally set up imperial boundaries that homogenize differences among women and/or subjugate women of different backgrounds, by assuming that all women's interests are identical. Donaldson and Kwok observe that

## INTRODUCTION

feminist study of religion is sometimes ‘replicating the colonial gaze in the name of serving a feminist agenda’ (2002: 3). This is well illustrated in Bulbeck’s critique of Western feminist study of other cultures. According to Bulbeck, Western feminism’s theoretical and empirical analyses of other cultures are often based on Western values, and neglect the variation of values within and among different cultures (1998). By so doing, women in other cultures might be silenced and their interests distorted (see Kwok 2002, for example). To be fair, Western feminists are probably not racist or imperialist or intentionally/consciously setting out with the agenda of dominating other cultures. They, like most people, simply see the world through their understanding of values, which are shaped by the cultures in which they grew up. This is a mistake that could be easily made by anyone. Hence, it is important to transcend the limitation of imperial boundaries in order to achieve a fair distribution of power, not only between men and women but also among women. In other words, if the project is about Buddhist women in Asia, then it is necessary to demarginalize Asian Buddhist women.

Demarginalization is not only important in theoretical discourse but also important in mundane practices. The negative consequence of failing to notice the cross-cultural differences is well demonstrated in Boserup’s famous study, *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970). In it, Boserup shows how imposing one’s own values in development projects in other countries and marginalizing the local values and cultures in these projects can bring disastrous consequences upon the very people and societies that these projects aimed to help (1970). Thus, for reasons to be explained below, the demarginalization of Asian Buddhist women in the feminist discourse of Buddhism is the agenda and prerequisite in this research.

As mentioned earlier, one of the sources of inspiration for this research is *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 1996). This book contains articles generated by Sakyadhita, an International Association of Buddhist Women. This movement was started in 1987 by Ayya Khema, Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and Karma Lekshe Tsomo to provide a special meeting of Buddhist and feminist ideas. The focuses of Sakyadhita are: (1) to create a network of communications among Buddhist women of the world, (2) to educate women as teachers of Buddhism, (3) to conduct research on women and Buddhism, and (4) to work for the establishment of the *Bhikṣuṇī Sangha* (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 1996: 2). Subsequent Sakyadhita conferences took place in Bangkok in 1991, Colombo 1993, Ladakh (India), 1995, Cambodia 1997, Lumbini (Nepal) 2000, Taipei 2002, and Seoul 2004. The various issues raised in Sakyadhita literature intrigued me. They opened my eyes to the stories of Buddhist women elsewhere. Sakyadhita literature, combined with Rita Gross’s *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993), motivated me to learn more about women in Buddhism. As an Asian Buddhist woman, I sometimes feel alienated by Western feminist discourse on Buddhism, including parts of *Buddhism After Patriarchy* and some Sakyadhita literature,

Table 1 Profiles of Sri Lanka and Taiwan (2002)

	<i>Sri Lanka</i>	<i>Taiwan</i>
Total population (thousands)	19,007	22,521
Population density (per square km)	303	622.3
Poverty headcount ratio (%)	22.7	0.76
Labor force participation rate, both sexes (%)	50.3	57.34
Labor force participation rate, female (%)	33.6	46.59
Average household expenditure on food (%)	44.5*	24.1
Email/internet user	4 (per 1000 people)**	37%***

Sources: For Sri Lanka: *Sri Lanka Statistical Data Sheet 2004*, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/misc/ds2004.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2005.

For Taiwan: *Statistical Yearbook*, Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C.: <http://eng.dgbas.gov.tw/lp.asp?CtNode=2351&CtUnit=1072&BaseDSD=36>, accessed 21 May 2005.

\* *Household Income And Expenditure Survey 2002*, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka: [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/poverty/HIES2002\\_DistrictLevel.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/poverty/HIES2002_DistrictLevel.pdf), accessed 21 May 2005.

\*\* *Poverty Statistics/Indicators For Sri Lanka*, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/poverty/PovertyStatistics.pdf>, accessed 23 May 2005.

\*\*\* *Taiwan Yearbook 2004*, Government Information Office: <http://www.gio.gov.tw/taiwan-website/5-gp/yearbook/P213.htm#6>, accessed 23 May 2005.

even though they are still an inspiration to me. Therefore, I decided to conduct research based on issues raised by the Sakyadhita movement, to investigate whether issues that deeply concern Western feminists actually matter to Buddhist women in Asia. One of these issues is the welfare of Buddhist nuns. Since a study on Sri Lankan and Taiwanese Buddhist women in general would have been too broad in scope, I narrowed the research topic by focusing on Buddhist nuns. I hope to present their views through interviews and surveys with them, in order to demarginalize their position in the current Western feminist discourse on Buddhism. The fieldwork findings will be detailed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Since the belief and practices of Buddhist women are interrelated with the political, social and economic conditions that they find themselves in, it will be necessary to pay attention to these conditions in Sri Lanka and Taiwan. A brief glance at the profiles of Sri Lanka and Taiwan (Table 1) reveals that the two differ in many ways. Unfortunately, the scope of this research prevents me from discussing the effects of these different social and economic elements in detail, although to some extent, I have taken these elements into consideration in this work.

### **The discovery of Buddhist women**

Though I am an Asian woman, I am basing the issues in my research on the Western study of Buddhism. This research is thus a product of the long

discovery of Buddhist women in Western academia. Compared with records of Buddhist men, records of Buddhist women seem to be few. It is true in Asian literature, as well as in Western literature. The interest in the study of Buddhism in the West may have grown considerably during the nineteenth century (Clarke 1997: 71–74), but the early voices of feminist study of Buddhism were waylaid by male agenda (Walters 1994: 359–364). After Mabel Bode<sup>3</sup> and Caroline A. Foley<sup>4</sup> (later known by her married name C.A.F. Rhys Davids) delivered their papers at the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists (1892), the next notable Western study on women in Buddhism emerged as late as 1930, with I.B. Horner's *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*. I.B. Horner's survey of women in Pāli literature is so thorough that *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* remains a significant introductory book to women in Buddhism till this day. The marginalization of women's interests in the religious/academic discourse is demonstrated by the fact that in spite of their enormous contribution to Buddhist study, Caroline A. Foley and I.B. Horner (probably Mabel Bode as well, though Ursula King does not provide a case study on her) are unappreciated and almost entirely forgotten by the male-dominated academia (King 1995b).

It seems that initially, Western discovery of Buddhist women focuses largely on the texts, on the history of women and the study of feminine images and symbols within Buddhist texts. Examples are Joanna Macy's *Perfection of Wisdom: Mother of all Buddhas* (1978) and Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition* (1979). As the interest in Buddhism as a religious practice grows in the West, feminist discourse on Buddhism gradually comes to notice Western women's experience with Buddhism and their interpretation of Buddhism. Sandy Boucher's *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (1988) is a good example. In this book, stories of American Buddhist women teachers are told. The word 'creating' in the title is interesting, for it indicates that Western Buddhist women have become active agents in shaping their Buddhist belief and practices. *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993) and *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* (1996) further call for feminist transformation of Buddhism. In other words, from the search for women's inclusion in textual and historical discourse, Western discovery of Buddhist women has moved to the focus on women's experience and women's active engagement with/in the religion.

Indeed, the various studies of women in Buddhism reflect the multiple developments of feminist study of religion, which is well summarized by Ursula King (1995a). In this chapter I have shown that this research aims to recognize the transformation in Buddhism and to demarginalize Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka and Taiwan.

Admittedly, I am not the first Asian woman to question the applicability of Western feminism in a non-Western context. Many Asian women have