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# Feminist Debate in Taiwan's Buddhism: The Issue of the Eight Garudhammas

Chiung Hwang Chen, Brigham Young University-Hawaii

**Abstract:** In 2001, during an academic conference on Humanistic Buddhism in Taipei, Venerable Shi Zhaohui, accompanied by a few Buddhist clergy and laypeople, tore apart a copy of the Eight Garudhammas (Eight Heavy Rules), regulations that govern the behavior of Buddhist nuns. Zhaohui's symbolic act created instant controversy as Taiwan's Buddhist community argued about the rules' authenticity and other issues within Buddhist monastic affairs. This paper examines the debate over the Eight Garudhammas and situates the debate within Taiwan's cultural terrain as well as the worldwide Buddhist feminist movement. I argue that while Zhaohui's call resulted in the abolishment of the rules neither at home nor abroad, it profoundly affected nuns' position in Buddhism and contributed to broader discussions on women and religion. In making this argument, I revisit the impact of Western feminism (and Western Buddhist feminists) on Eastern religions and reconsider the tensions this relationship encompasses.

**Keywords:** feminism, Buddhist feminist, Taiwan Buddhism, Eight Garudhammas, Shi Zhaohui

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## Introduction

During a 2001 academic conference on Renjian Foijiao (Humanistic Buddhism 人間佛教) in Taipei, and accompanied by a few Buddhist clergy and laypeople, Venerable Shih Chao-hwei (Shi Zhaohui 釋昭慧) tore apart a copy of the Eight Garudhammas (Eight Heavy/Special Rules 八敬法), regulations that govern the behavior of Buddhist nuns.<sup>1</sup> Chao-hwei, a Buddhist reformer and arguably Taiwan's most outspoken nun, claimed the precepts reflect gender hierarchy and inequality within the Buddhist *sangha* (monk/nun community) and have functioned as a "tyrant," enabling monks' male chauvinism and dampening nuns' self-esteem.<sup>2</sup> She asserted the rules were not from Buddha but were later inventions by the male Buddhist hierarchy to discourage the development of *bhikkhuni* (nuns') monastic order. After two thousand years of consequences, Chao-hwei argued, it was time to drop the regulations. Chao-hwei's symbolic act created instant controversy as Taiwan's Buddhist community argued about the rules' authenticity and other issues within Buddhist monastic affairs.

This paper examines the debate over the Eight Heavy Rules and situates the debate within Taiwan's cultural terrain and the worldwide Buddhist feminist movement. I argue that while Chao-hwei's call resulted in the abolishment of the rules neither at home nor abroad, it profoundly affected nuns' position in Buddhism and contributed to broader discussions on women and religion. It also provides insight into the parameters within which feminism within Taiwan's Buddhism currently operates. The paper first explores feminist discussion of gender within Buddhism. It then identifies the social context that contributed to the rise of Buddhist feminist consciousness on the island. An explanation of the Eight Heavy Rules and their historical development is provided before the main part of the paper, which focuses on the debate over the call for terminating the rules. The paper concludes by assessing the impacts of the

incident and connecting the debate to the broader international Buddhist women's movement.

### **Buddhism and Gender**

Although commonly recognized as containing a liberating egalitarian theology (i.e., the belief that all living things are equal), Buddhism, like many organized religions, is “an overwhelmingly male-created institution dominated by a patriarchal power structure” (Paul 1979, xix). Issues concerning women in Buddhism have increasingly attracted the interest, not only of religious scholars and feminists, but also of the general public, as Buddhism has experienced revitalization in Asia and gradually become popular in the Western world. Gender and Buddhism as a subject of academic inquiry, however, remains in its infancy and mostly in a peripheral position, despite being a millennia-long issue (Faure 2003; Li 2002).

Much of this field's literature deals with textual studies. Concentrating on Pāli texts in the Theravāda tradition, I. B. Horner (1930), for example, surveyed early Buddhist portrayals of women and feminine symbols, finding that females, especially in terms of their sexuality, were often described as mysterious, sensual, elusive, polluted, corrupted, and destructive; thus, the tradition implied, they needed to be controlled and conquered.<sup>3</sup> In examining various Mahāyāna texts, Venerable Shi Yinshun (印順) questioned the Eight Heavy Rules' legitimacy in the 1960s by pointing out their inconsistency in Buddhist scriptures (see Shi 1981; 1988; Qiu 2001a; Shih 2002). Diana Y. Paul (1979) similarly examined texts in the Mahāyāna tradition and found a wide spectrum of portrayals of women, some positive and many negative. Unlike Horner, who asserts that the larger (misogynist Hindu) culture led to inconsistencies between Buddhist texts and ideals, Paul regards the ambiguous images as highlighting the development of Buddhism from a primitive stage to the next. Gu Zhengmei (古正美 1985) confirms the presence of sexism in the Buddhist canon while pointing out other ambiguous and contradictory portrayals of women. Rita Gross's *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993) examines Buddhist canonical literature from Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, providing arguably the first feminist analysis of Buddhist texts and theology in the United States. Employing the analytical framework Western feminists used to critique Christian patriarchy, Gross explains gender ideology in Buddhism as well as male dominance in monastic orders.

Another area of feminist scholarship in gender and Buddhism emphasizes the connections between theory and practice. Through interviews with American Buddhist nuns and lay female practitioners, Sandy Boucher ([1988]1993, xi), for example, illustrates these women's “spiritual paths within the context of Buddhist practice and establishments.” Utilizing a feminist framework, the book provides critical insight on the tension between feminism and patriarchal Buddhism, religious activism and spiritual conviction, monasticism, and laity, etc. Gross (1993), on the other hand, calls for a feminist transformation of Buddhism in the Western world through creation of a new type of monastic community, reconstruction of an androgynous view of Buddhism, and incorporation of serious meditation practice with work and motherhood responsibilities (see also Tsomo 1995). Shih Chao-hwei (1999) approaches gender inequality, within monastic orders, from Buddhist discipline and ethics. Her work reflects Western feminist critiques of religion while embodying strong local consciousness and subjectivity (Li 2002). Li Yuzhen (李玉珍 1999) and Cheng Wei-yi's (Zheng Weiyi 2007) ethnographies explore women's experience with Buddhism and their interpretations of Buddhism. Chen Meihua (陳美華 1998) and Cheng apply postcolonial theory and Third World feminist analysis to the Western feminist critique of Asian Buddhism. Both argue that Western Buddhist feminist scholars often presume superiority over Asian Buddhist women by stereotyping them as patriarchy's victims and by speaking

for them. In envisioning the future of the field, however, Li (2002) deems postcolonialism impractical and ineffective in promoting an international Buddhist women's movement. She argues that Taiwan Buddhism's diverse nature and modernization have long promoted a dismantling of the stereotypes of weak, passive, and helpless Buddhist women. Postcolonial discourse cannot explain the phenomenal achievement of Taiwan's bhikkhuni saṅgha (Li 2002). She urges future inquiry into gender and Buddhism that will locate Taiwan's Buddhism in a global context and encourage dialogue between Taiwanese and international scholars.

### **Buddhist Feminist Consciousness-Raising in Taiwan**

Taiwan seems an ideal place for a Buddhist feminist movement because of Buddhism's current social prominence. Buddhism benefitted greatly from the island's economic growth since the 1960s (particularly after the '80s). As people could give more economically, they contributed to traditional religions, which also benefited from a growing connection in people's minds to grassroots identity. With Taiwan's economic success, people pushed for greater political openness and the lifting of Martial Law (obtained in 1987). Democratization further decentralized religious activities and allowed religious groups to expand. Charismatic Buddhist leaders arose. In the past two decades, the Buddhist population increased fourfold, from about two million in the mid-1980s to more than eight million currently, about 35 percent of the island's 23 million people (Laliberté 2004; "Religion" 2010). Major Buddhist organizations have woven themselves into Taiwan's social fabric by running multi-million-dollar enterprises, including temples, schools, hospitals, and other social institutions.

Economic prosperity and political democratization in Taiwan also liberated women from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The contemporary women's movement in Taiwan took root in the 1970s when Lü Xiulian (呂秀蓮, later the island's only female vice president, 2000-2008) proposed the so-called new feminism, promoting the idea that people should be human first and men and women second, and calling for a rise in feminist consciousness (Qiu 2001a). Li Yuanzhen (李元貞) later instituted *Awakening* (婦女新知) magazine and a foundation of the same name in the 1980s to campaign for equal education, equal work, and equal pay. Since then, a wide range of women's organizations arose promoting diverse agendas relating to women's rights (Li 2005). In general, the women's movement has transformed Taiwan from a traditional patriarchal society into one more willing to challenge authority and open to gender negotiation and discussion. Women's lives, especially for the younger generation, have dramatically improved.

Taiwanese society's openness and the improvement of women's rights contribute to the success (both quantitative and qualitative) of the island's female Buddhist monastic orders. The current ratio between nuns and monks in Taiwan is about five to one (Yang 2002). Women play a crucial role in major Buddhist organizations. Venerable Zhengyan (證嚴) of the Tzuchi Foundation (Ciji or Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation 慈濟基金會), for example, is probably the most respected woman in Taiwan. Other women also hold key positions and constitute the majority of volunteers. Even the male-led Foguanshan (佛光山) and Fagushan (法鼓山) monasteries, two of the most influential Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, rely heavily on nuns' assistance. All executives of Foguanshan's five branches are female, and women usually constitute over 80 percent of seminary and activities participants. Taiwanese nuns' educational level is also impressive, particularly among the younger generation. About 80 percent in the Xiangguang (香光) Female Monastery are college educated. Many nuns hold master's and Ph.D. degrees, often from Western institutions (Cai 1998). The Dalai Lama has visited Taiwan twice to observe Buddhism's Taiwanese

experience, particularly the so-called “bhikkhuni phenomenon,” in order to assess the possibility of re-establishing female monastic orders in Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhist historian Jiang Canteng (2003) finds three factors crucial to the success of Taiwanese nuns: the increasing education in Taiwan, society’s openness, and nuns’ economic independence. He asserts that nuns have become the keystone of Taiwan’s Buddhism; if nuns were to strike, Jiang posits, the whole Buddhist system on the island would immediately collapse (see also Cai 1998).

Another significant factor in the strength of Buddhism and the bhikkhuni saṅgha in Taiwan is the implementation of Humanistic Buddhism, which sets the island’s Buddhism apart from other Buddhist traditions, including those of its counterparts in Japan and Korea. This school of thought came from Venerable Taixu (太虛) and his student Yinshun, who envisioned universal salvation instead of selective salvation. They encouraged monks and nuns to actively participate in the secular world, help improve society, and build the Pure Land on Earth instead of waiting for it in the afterlife. Most major Buddhist organizations in Taiwan claim lineage from Humanistic Buddhism and vigorously engage in secular affairs (i.e., building hospitals, schools, charities, and media outlets) and social movements (i.e., environmental protection, anti-nuclear power, anti-corruption, and anti-gambling). Among the island’s prominent Buddhists, Chao-hwei probably most keenly connects the ideals of Humanistic Buddhism with actions. Since her national debut in 1989 condemning media stereotypes of Buddhist nuns, and in addition to her protest against the Eight Heavy Rules, Chao-hwei has regularly participated in social movements, walking hand in hand with secular protestors to, for example, fight against nuclear waste as well as for animal rights and, later, women’s rights (Shih 2008).

### **The Establishment of the Bhikkhuni Monastic Order and the Eight Garudhammas**

Buddhist feminists have questioned the merit and the validity of the Eight Heavy Rules for more than a century. The precepts remain controversial within the Buddhist community, both in Asia and worldwide. The call by Chao-hwei to abolish the rules rekindled the controversy and generated heated debate.

Narratives about the Buddha’s reluctance to establish the first bhikkhuni saṅgha are well documented in Buddhist canon (see for examples Gross 1993; Cheng 2007; Shih 2000). These stories state that five years after the Buddha Siddhāttha Gotama achieved enlightenment and founded the *bhikkhu* (monks’) monastic order, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha’s aunt and stepmother, asked him to set up a monastery for women. He rejected the request of Mahāpajāpatī and her 500 female followers three times. Discouraged but persistent, the women shaved their heads, put on monastic robes, and traveled on foot to the Buddha’s next stop. Moved by the women’s determination and miserable condition, Ānanda, the Buddha’s closest aide and half-brother (son of Mahāpajāpatī), pleaded for a bhikkhuni monastery on behalf of the women. Again, his proposal was rejected three times. According to Davids and Oldenberg’s translation (*Vinaya Texts*, 322), Ānanda then asked the Buddha, “Are women, Lord, capable—when they have gone forth from the household life and entered the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Blessed One—are they capable of realizing the fruit of conversion, or of the second Path, or of the third Path, or of Arahatsip?” The Buddha assured Ānanda that women possessed the same potential as men to achieve enlightenment and perfection. Ānanda then asked why—since women could benefit from the monastic order and since Mahāpajāpatī had been very kind in caring for the Buddha—her and the other women’s wish could not come true? The Buddha finally relented under one condition: “If then, Ānanda, Mahāpajāpatī [Mahāpajāpatī] the Gotamī take upon herself the Eight Chief Rules let that be reckoned to her as her initiation” (*Vinaya Texts*, 322). When she heard the rules, Mahāpajāpatī was

said to have accepted the rules without hesitation.

According to an oft-quoted statement, the Buddha expressed concerns over the negative impact the bhikkhuni order might have on the fate of Buddhism:

If, Ānanda, women had not received permission to go out from the household life and enter the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, then would the pure religion, Ānanda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have now received that permission, the pure religion, Ānanda, will not now last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years. (*Vinaya Texts*, 325; see also Gross 1993, 32)

By admitting women into Buddhist orders, as the Buddha was said to predict, Buddhism's worldly life span would be reduced to half its natural duration. The Buddha used a further unflattering analogy to describe the damage female monastic orders would produce:

Ānanda, in whatever religion women are ordained, that religion will not last long. As families that have more women than men are easily destroyed by robbers, as a plentiful rice-field once infested by white bones will not long remain, as a sugarcane field invaded by red rust will not long remain, even so the True Dharma will not last long. (Quoted in Goodwin 2008, 207)

His prescription for the potential disaster, recorded in Buddhist literature, was the Eight Heavy Rules: "Even, Ānanda, as a man, looking forward, may build a dyke to a great reservoir so that the water may not overflow, even so, Ānanda, were the eight important rules for nuns laid down by me" (Quoted in Gross 1993, 33).

The Eight Heavy Rules vary in different Buddhist texts, but generally include the following:

1. A nun, however senior, must always bow down in front of a monk, however junior.
2. A nun is not to spend the rainy season in a district in which there are no monks.
3. After keeping the rainy season, the nun must hold the ceremony of repentance of their offences before monk and nun saṅghas.
4. A nun who has committed a serious offence must be disciplined by both saṅghas.
5. A nun must not admonish a monk, whereas a monk can admonish a nun.
6. A nun must receive the upasampada ordination from both monk and nun saṅghas after two years of studying the Precepts.
7. Every half month the nun must ask the monk saṅgha to give exhortation.
8. A nun must not in any way abuse or revile a monk.

These rules appear to position nuns as abjectly inferior to monks. Respect flows one way, from nuns to monks. Buddhist texts often use gender stereotypes that favor traditional masculine characteristics over traditional femininity. While women's potential to become enlightened is not entirely denied, male as the norm is never doubted. For example, a perfectly enlightened human image is embodied in a male (the Buddha's) figure with the so-called 32 physical signs/characteristics of a Great Man. To be born as a woman, on the other hand, is a result of negative karma accumulated in the previous life. Some Buddhist canonical literature attributes 84 acts/attitudes to women, including being envious, greedy, weak in wisdom, prideful, jealous, stingy, lustful, sensual, etc. Because of their perceived flawed nature, women are said to be born with five obstacles preventing them from achieving enlightenment and becoming rulers/monarch, the king of Gods, the king of death, warriors, and Brahmā. Nuns are thus to obey more disciplines and rules than monks.<sup>4</sup> Men may enter and withdraw from the monastic order seven times, while women receive only one chance. Many observers attribute Buddhist misogyny to Hindu culture

or East Asian Confucianism. However, while cultural influence on religion might be worth scholarly exploration, it is not good scholarship to place the blame on culture alone without being critical of dynamics within the religion itself. As Diana Y. Paul points out, “if Buddhists accepted nonegalitarian beliefs from outside their original teachings and incorporated them as sutras [scriptural canon] ... they had to have accepted such beliefs as worthy of the status of scripture. To that extent, they could not have considered such nonegalitarian views as the antithesis of the Buddha’s doctrine” (Paul 1979, xxiii).

### **Challenging the Eight Garudhammas**

Chao-hwei’s call to abolish the Eight Heavy Rules involved an almost decade-long process. She first engaged in a pen fight with advocates of the rules in the *Saṅgha Magazine* (僧伽雜誌) in 1992. Two articles in back-to-back issues of the magazine emphasized the importance of nuns following the Precepts, citing a long list of monastic ethical standards for relationships between monks and nuns. These include:

- When a monk speaks, nuns should put down what they are doing immediately, listen, and reply to the monk respectfully, without moving their bodies or avoiding eye contact.
- Monks should be provided with desirable food (before nuns are served) and they should also be given a larger quantity (than that given to nuns).
- Nuns should not claim any success for their achievements; rather, they should attribute their success to monks.
- By nature women/nuns like to reveal others’ privacy and to gossip in their spare time.
- It is typical for women to be good at concealing their own mistakes.
- Nuns should study and memorize the 84 Acts of Women in order to avoid such actions. They should also follow the Eight Heavy Rules strictly (see Shih 2002, 31-2).<sup>5</sup>

To Chao-hwei this was “enslaving education,” “brainwashing” nuns to accept and rationalize their inferior position in the Buddhist community. She contested each of the claims and accused the magazine of distorting Buddhist doctrine and of advocating “male chauvinism” (Shih 2002, 32, 67).

Chao-hwei frequently wrote thereafter to protest incidents of gender inequality within Buddhist circles and denounce *Saṅgha Magazine’s* use of the Eight Heavy Rules to discipline nuns and advance male privilege. Her most critical remarks came in mid-2000 after the magazine published three articles presumably by nuns (pen names were used), detailing their “fun experiences” performing the 84 Acts of Women as instructed by their superiors in order to remind the nuns to avoid those behaviors. Chao-hwei asserted that such a performance not only violates Buddhist discipline and ethics, but also forces nuns and other women to unconsciously confirm those “hysterical stereotypes” about women as truth. She criticized the nuns’ male superiors (monks) as “anomalous playboys” and “chauvinist pigs” who “obtained sexual satisfaction/gratification through voyeurism” by watching nuns perform those acts (Shih 2002, 113, 120, trans. by author).

The call to end the Eight Heavy Rules was strategically planned to coincide with two important events in early 2001: a conference commemorating Venerable Yinshun’s 96<sup>th</sup> birthday and lifelong achievements, and the Dalai Lama’s visit to Taiwan. A founder of Humanistic Buddhism, Yinshun was among the first monks to advocate for gender equality in Chinese/Taiwan’s Buddhism (Qiu 2001a). In preparation for the conference, Chao-hwei wrote an article describing how the rules have become an “unequal treaty” between monks and nuns and a “tight shackle” limiting the development of nuns’ potential. She argued both that the Heavy Rules contradict the central doctrine of Buddhism and that the Buddha permitted abolishing/modifying trivial rules incompatible with local tradition and culture (Shih 2002, 139-48).

Chao-hwei also attempted to use the Dalai Lama's visit to make her call more salient internationally. She wrote three days before the conference that gender issues should be a major part of Buddhist ethics for the new century—the theme of the Dalai Lama's speeches in Taiwan. She suggested that actions were more important than talk and urged the Dalai Lama to help restore nuns' orders in Tibetan and Vajrayāna Buddhism (Shih 2002, 169-73).

The conference took place on March 31, 2001 in Taipei. During one session, Chao-hwei read a declaration to abolish the Eight Heavy Rules. In the document, she emphasized Mahāpajāpatī's role in Buddhist history by calling her a “brave woman with revolutionary consciousness” (Shih 2002, 175). Chao-hwei entitled the declaration “The Second Revolution of Modern Mahāpajāpatī” to echo Mahāpajāpatī's first (failed) attempt to get the Buddha to reconsider the rule that requires a nun to bow down in front of a monk, regardless of the seniority of the two. As Chao-hwei read the declaration, eight other prominent Taiwan Buddhists (two monks, two nuns, two laymen, and two laywomen, intended to represent the unity of clergy and laity) symbolically tore up the rules one by one. Shi Chuandao (釋傳道 2002), one of the monks participating in the event, affirmed the act as the nuns' declaration of independence—asserting freedom from their current subordinate position. Jiang Canteng (2001a, 110), a well-known historian of Buddhism who also participated in the rending of the rules, called the incident a “daring act,” and, “the first of its kind in thousands of years of Mahāyāna tradition,” one with “great potential to affect Buddhism in Asia and in other regions” (trans. by author).

In spite of its potential historical importance, the act faced immediate condemnation and generated passionate debate. The Buddhist establishment's conservative faction questioned its legitimacy and severely criticized Chao-hwei for violating the Buddha's teachings; some even called for her expulsion from the Buddhist order. The following section analyzes four central issues emerging from the debate.

### *The Authenticity of the Rules*

The most intense debate concerned the Eight Heavy Rules' authenticity. Proponents claimed the Buddha laid the rules down as a precondition for organizing the nuns' order and therefore should not be overruled. The reformers, however, argued that the rules were not authentically from the Buddha but were instead later additions to Buddhist *sutras*.<sup>6</sup> Chao-hwei pointed out four major problems with the rules. First, according to Buddhist literature, the rules were a preventive guide given before the bhikkhuni order was originally established. This is inconsistent with all other monastic regulations, which always *followed* mistakes. Thus, in Chao-hwei's opinion, the rules are unattributable to the Buddha. Second, contradictory canonical descriptions invoke suspicion about authenticity. Some texts regard the rules as fundamental disciplines, others do not mention them; some treat rule violations as severe offenses, while others regard them as minor. Third, according to Chao-hwei, the Buddha taught that all living things are equal, the core Buddhist principle; the rules manifest gender inequality, however. Fourth, Chao-hwei suggested that if the rules were laid down by the Buddha, then he must be seen as not only law giver, but also law breaker. She cited a Buddhist story: Mahāpajāpatī complained about some monks' mischief. The Buddha scolded the monks in response, not Mahāpajāpatī. If the rules were followed, Buddha would have disciplined Mahāpajāpatī for wrongly admonishing monks. Reasoning that he would not contradict himself, Chao-hwei concluded that the rules did not come from the pro-equality Buddha (Shih 2002, 207-11).

Granting the power of Chao-hwei's main moral message, her supporting arguments can nevertheless be questioned. Like many other practicing Buddhist feminists, Chao-hwei tends to romanticize the



Buddha as a flawless godly figure. She is reluctant to entertain the possibility that the Buddha might be a product of his time and culture. While the Buddha clearly challenged some social norms of his time (i.e., eventually allowing women to enter monastic life), he might have also been affected by the prevailing misogynist Hindu culture and occasionally followed the era's conventions. The rhetoric Chao-hwei uses, seemingly effective at first glance, is sometimes contradictory and undercuts her point. One example is Chao-hwei's use of Mahāpajāpati's "first revolution"—asking the Buddha to reconsider the rule on nuns bowing down to monks—to sustain her own "second revolution" in abolishing the rules. Another example is the story of Mahāpajāpati's complaints about monks. Both instances affirm, rather than challenge, the existence of the Eight Heavy Rules during the Buddha's time. On other occasions, Chao-hwei seems to admit that the rules, or at least parts, in fact came from the Buddha and that the Buddha was indeed not fond of organizing the bhikkhuni saṅgha in the first place. However, she reasons that both originally not allowing nuns to create an order and issuing the rules stemmed from the Buddha's love and mercy for women, to protect them from danger and attack (Shih 2002, 359; Shi 2002, 76). This explanation, again, romanticizes the Buddha and contradicts her main thesis.

Whatever her inconsistencies, Chao-hwei's opponents—represented by the high hierarchy of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BARCO), the governmental organization overseeing Buddhist activities in Taiwan—failed to provide substantial counterarguments. Instead they asked Yinshun to verify the rules' authenticity. His brief reply (35 words) contains two points. First, the Eight Heavy Rules are indeed Buddha's teaching. Second, any modification to fit contemporary cultural norms would need to follow proper procedure: consensus from the Buddhist elders and passage in a council meeting (Shi 2001, 232). Yinshun's response surprised most reformers, since he was the first in Mahāyāna Buddhism to question the rules' authenticity. Seeing contradictions between Yinshun's current position and his early statements, historian Qiu Minjie (2001b) asked for further explanation. In response, Yinshun referred to Venerable Qingde's (清德) *Yinshun's Thoughts on Buddhist Disciplines* (印順導師的律學思想, see Jiang 2001b). Interpreting this move, Jiang (2001b) suggested that Qingde and Chao-hwei's main arguments are in agreement; both assert that parts of the rules may indeed have come from the Buddha but that the male Buddhist hierarchy likely added other parts later.

Chao-hwei's opposition argued that while Yinshun questioned parts of the rules, he never called for modification or termination. Qiu (2001b) nevertheless considered it simply a matter of time: the Buddhist environment in the 1960s—when Yinshun raised his doubts—did not allow him to propose any gender reforms. Jiang (2001b) agreed, claiming that the new generation can turn the page as society changes. Although deeming Yinshun "the greatest monk since Xuanzang"<sup>7</sup> ("玄奘以來第一人" see Shih 2002, 226), Jiang (2001a; 2001b) nevertheless considers him a "historical figure" and "a giant in thinking but midget in action" in regards to Buddhist reforms. Jiang sees Chao-hwei, on the other hand, as the one to implement Yinshun's thoughts and Humanistic Buddhism (Jiang 2002, 3).

### *Involvement of Laity*

Another key issue concerned lay involvement. Chao-hwei's opponents insisted on the concept that only saṅgha should be involved with resolving saṅgha's problems. They argued that the Eight Heavy Rules are monastic ethics with no relevance to the laity. Chao-hwei disputed her opponents' view by accusing them of being hierarchical, seeing themselves as superior to the laity. She argued that Buddhism will not survive without the laity and its financial support. She further asserted that the meeting by the Buddhist Association following the conference was illegitimate because the convening nuns were not

included. Chuandao echoed this point, asserting equality between the monastic orders and the laity and the importance of a transparent process (Shi 2002). Qiu (2001b) took a different tack, explaining that members of the Buddhist order led the event, while the laity only supported it; therefore, the call to end the rules did not violate the principle at stake. She also pointed to many cases in Buddhist history in which the laity helped solve problems among the clergy. The opinions of laypeople, she claimed, have been important and respected historically.

#### *To End or Not to End the Garudhammas*

Many in the Buddhist community questioned the need to formally abolish the Eight Heavy Rules, reasoning that the rules were typically not followed anyway. For example, Venerable Xingyun (星雲) of the Foguanshan Monastery asserted that the rules had long been “frozen” in his monastery. He claimed that time would eventually eliminate the rules; there was no need for a dramatic ending (see Su 2001). Chao-hwei (Shih 2002, 217) responded that “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is an appropriate analogy for those who refuse to see gender inequality. She noted in many monastic orders a recent resurgence in emphasizing the rules through various venues, including Buddhist seminaries and media. This “demeaning trend,” Chao-hwei claimed, was the tipping point that led to her call to abolish the rules (Shih 2002, 161).

Many have spoken out in support of Chao-hwei. Historian Yang Huinan (楊惠南 2002), for example, told of a nun who immolated herself in protest because she was not able to rationalize the teaching that women are by nature inferior to men and thus unable to achieve enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> One restaurant owner, Li Desheng (李德昇 2001), observed gender inequality within monastic practices. From his vantage point as a layman active in Buddhist circles, he concluded that one’s sex, not one’s ability, education, talent, seniority, integrity, or moral conduct, determined the position one held in the Buddhist hierarchy. Li noted that he feels unsettled when seeing nuns, always the ones carrying out day-to-day monastic business, usually positioned at the periphery of power. Chen Minhe (陳明和), a business professor, argued that the bottom line is that the rules are outdated, unfit for modern life, and therefore need changing. Modernization of Buddhist disciplines, he claimed, would positively impact Buddhism (Conference 2002, 190-1).

#### *Means to Bring Out the Issue*

Critics gave two main objections to Chao-hwei’s methods. First, many considered tearing the Eight Heavy Rules in a public gathering to be too dramatic. Take Buddhism historian You Xiangzhou (游祥洲), for example. Although supporting Chao-hwei’s cause, he nevertheless thought her methods were somewhat abrasive. In his opinion, reforms such as this should be promoted more gently (Conference 2002, 196-7). A layman, Xie Dakun (謝大焜), with no apparent awareness of his male privileges and with a bias toward a backlash against feminism, accused Chao-hwei of creating a showdown with the (male) establishment. He suggested that

women should understand their bodies’ limitations. They need to first seek to control their reproductive issues and develop their knowledge and economic ability. Only then they can gradually become equal with men. I hope that all nuns, including Venerable Chao-hwei, will rise up. Then they will naturally be equal with all monks without needing to fight for equality. (Conference 2002, 192-3)

Venerable Hokuan (厚觀) similarly questioned whether nuns can really achieve equality even if the

rules are terminated. He argued that women, like Buddhists in the early days, should “bear persecution without complaining” and “be rational and forgiving” (Quoted in Shih 2002, 199, trans. by author).

Chao-hwei fought back, arguing that it would have defeated the declaration’s purpose if it had not been presented publicly. She admitted that nuns might not receive equal treatment after abolishment of the rules, just as women are not necessarily treated equally in everyday life despite constitutional protections. But, she claimed, that should not be the excuse for perpetuating gender inequality (Conference 2002, 205).

Some nuns also expressed discomfort over Chao-hwei’s forcefulness and preferred a more modest method of resistance, not wanting to display family feuds in front of others. In a study about nuns in both Taiwan and Sri Lanka conducted not long after the controversy, Cheng (2007) found herself entangled in the controversy. She claims that nearly all of her Taiwanese nun informants, regardless of individual opinions about the rules, expressed disapproval toward Chao-hwei and her supporters due to their sharp language, blunt criticism of opponents, and tendency to create factions within the Buddhist community. Cheng quotes a typical response:

[Chao-hwei’s] appeal was right, but her method was wrong... [M]ost people cannot accept the method she used... If you based your appeal on theory, or to hold a conference so that both men and women could discuss together calmly, then perhaps everybody would accept the result... In the Buddhist tradition, the Vinaya is sacred and should not be stained. But she openly called people to tear apart [the rules] in public... But what right [did] she have to ask the laity to tear apart the rules... In traditional Buddhism, the laity did not have any right to interfere with the monastic affairs... It’s just like no one should interfere in the domestic affairs of your family... She made a big issue out of it and gained lots of fame... I don’t feel what she did benefited her appeal. But I completely agree with her appeal.<sup>9</sup> (2007, 88-9)

The second objection to the event’s execution concerned who should call for abolishment. Opponents claimed that due to the importance of the issue, many more than the handful of people who participated in the event should have been involved in the decision. They suggested that the elders of the monastic orders, through appropriate protocol, should discuss the matter extensively and come to a consensus (“Minutes” 2002, 234; Qiu 2001b). In Chao-hwei’s opinion, however, consensus creation among Buddhist elders is problematic for two reasons. First, it does not solve the problem of a small number of people making the decision for the whole group. Second, the current power structure within Taiwan’s Buddhist hierarchy benefits male privilege and dominance by excluding women from decision-making processes. Sharing power with Buddhist women, in her opinion, will not occur without a forceful call for gender equality (Conference 2002, 196-7).

## **Conclusion**

In spite of her failure to end the Eight Heavy Rules within Taiwan’s Buddhism, and despite some questionable tactics in the attempt, Chao-hwei’s efforts deserve admiration from feminists with an interest in greater equality within religion. This paper focuses on four themes that emerged from the debate over the Rules. Collectively the themes point to some of the current limits for feminism in Taiwan’s Buddhism. The debates over the Rules’ authenticity and whether or not they should be ended point to a literalistic stance toward (even questionable) traditional Buddhist texts that feminist Buddhists must negotiate. Questions over the involvement of laity and Chao-hwei’s methods suggest the difficulty of pushing conventional bounds of propriety through novel feminist action. The debates arguably show that

while Taiwan's Buddhist feminism may in some ways be at the forefront of feminism within Buddhism more generally, it operates within a context in which Buddhist traditional practice often takes precedence over the central concept of the equality of all living things.

Chao-hwei's call to end the Eight Heavy Rules unfortunately did not produce a consensus among Buddhist organizations. However, at least one short-term consequence seems apparent as Taiwan's Buddhist governing bodies lifted gender restrictions on leadership positions and recruited more women into their offices (Wongyen 2001; Taipei's 2001; "Personnel" 2002). In a broader sense, the controversy brought gender issues in religion forward in both academic discourse and public awareness on the island. Prior to the event, essentially only a few scholars paid attention to gender issues in Taiwanese religion or Buddhism. Many practicing Buddhists were unaware of gender inequality in either Buddhist texts or the monastic system. The event also exposed the need for feminist consciousness-raising in religious circles. Seeing great accomplishments from Buddhist women, many people in both Taiwanese society and the Buddhist community more broadly have celebrated the achievements. To some, the controversy itself illustrates the power women hold, as Chao-hwei was able to challenge the system, even if not entirely successfully. Many observers, however, overlook the more subtle, but perhaps more stubborn forms of sexism in Buddhism beyond the structural problems such as the Eight Heavy Rules. Strongly distinctive attitudes toward men and women still exist. These might be residues from sexist images of women in Buddhist canon and/or from patriarchal cultural norms.

An argument can be made that this more subtle sexism affects more Buddhist women than does the issue Chao-hwei is fighting. The Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation is arguably the largest and most effective women's organization in Taiwan. Women volunteers are its backbone. Their active involvement in charity, medical aid, and social movements has won wide respect from the government and public. On the surface, the foundation's women embody the new, empowered women who claim independence through volunteerism. In reality, however, its core belief is centrally based on conservative family values and division of labor. Jobs in the foundation divide between men and women according to conventional gender traits and stereotypes. Field studies reveal that women participate more in the private sphere with the organization, while its men are more active in the public sphere; men are privileged in organizational activities. In other words, women in the foundation might have achieved "body liberation" by walking out of their homes, but their minds remain constrained by traditional gender roles (Chen 2004).

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation's Zhengyan often perpetuates gender stereotypes and unequal relationships. When discussing marital infidelity, for example, she seldom places responsibility on unfaithful husbands; instead she advises women to look into themselves to understand their husbands' behaviors. If women improve themselves, show tenderness and merciful hearts, she suggests, the husband will eventually return. Zhengyan even asks wives to accept their husbands' mistresses—"Love the person he loves, so everybody will be happy" (Shi n.d.; see also Chen 2004, trans. by author). Foguanshan's Xingyun, likewise, often invokes gender stereotypes in his talks on family ethics. He asserts that women should uphold the five goodnesses in order to maintain a happy family. That is, women should take care of housework, be patient and not complain, remain chaste, respect and serve their husbands, and treat relatives and friends with care. In warning monks to resist sexual temptation, Xingyun recites stories from Buddhist literature describing women as corrupt, dangerous, and ugly beneath their appearance (Lin 2001). Thus, with these currently most respected Buddhists' teachings, the liberation of women's minds seems far away.

## **Intercultural Implication**

Issues derived from the call to abolish the Eight Heavy Rules involve the position of nuns in Taiwanese Buddhism in the larger context of the international Buddhist women's movement, and more specifically, the question of whether Buddhist women can achieve common goals cross-culturally. The controversy foregrounds tension between different Buddhist traditions. With their phenomenal success, and also because the bhikkhuni order exists only in Mahāyāna Buddhism, some Buddhist women in Taiwan might regard themselves as superior or at least in a better position than their Buddhist sisters elsewhere, especially in Theravāda and Tibetan traditions. Some carry their own version of the "white man's burden," feeling obligated to help other Buddhist women. In justifying going public against the Eight Heavy Rules, Chao-hwei, for example, claimed that

if Taiwan's bhiksunis were not be [*sic*] able to serve as the spokespersons for female Buddhist practitioners in the world on gender issues, then it's wholly impossible for those in Tibetan Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism to expect that "one of these days their time will come" in such a patriarchal society as Asia! Therefore, on second consideration, I decided that I really should not be subtly impeded by the status of Buddhist women in the Tibetan and Theravāda tradition[s], and maintained a discreet silence thereby. (Shih 2008, 132-3; for support for the notion that Taiwanese nuns lead Buddhist reform in Asia, see Qiu 2001b)

Like those long-criticized Western feminists, these Buddhist women feel a need to speak for the Buddhist women of South Asia and Tibet whom they stereotype as helpless victims of male dominance. Chao-hwei's challenge to the Dalai Lama to promote women's rights and restore the bhikkhuni saṅgha, although well-intentioned, appears prideful and disrespectful to some.

This sense of superiority provides an interesting contrast to how some Buddhist women in Theravāda and Tibetan traditions view Mahāyāna Buddhism because of the questions regarding the legitimacy of the Mahāyāna nuns' order (or of the entire Mahāyāna tradition). One of Cheng's Sri Lanka informants, for example, disapproved of the Mahāyāna tradition bluntly: "Mahāyāna Buddhism is not the real Buddhism. It was forged! After Lord Buddha preached Dharma, there was a disagreement and some people became astray from Dharma... that's why they made up Mahāyānaism..." (Cheng 2007, 179-80). The origin of the Mahāyāna bhikkhuni ordination in Sri Lanka does not alter many Theravāda women's opinions. Another informant, in fact, felt threatened by Mahāyāna Buddhism: "People think that people from America, Taiwan, Korea, Burma, all these Mahāyāna countries want to come to destroy our Theravāda Buddhism... Monks and nuns in Mahāyāna countries live together. That's why we don't like Mahāyāna Buddhism..."<sup>10</sup> (Cheng 2007, 80). Many Theravāda women believe their Buddhism is more authentic and more closely reflects the original Buddhism (Tomalin 2009). Some Theravāda women therefore prefer the status quo to diffusion of bhikkhuni ordination from Mahāyāna Buddhism.

After observing Taiwan's nun orders twice, the Dalai Lama called a meeting to discuss the possibility of restoring bhikkhuni saṅgha in Tibetan Buddhism. The issue has been put on hold, probably due to concerns over the "legitimacy" of Mahāyāna bhikkhuni ordination. Chao-hwei has been frustrated by the Dalai Lama's non-action, arguing that the benefit outweighs formality issues. The Dalai Lama explained his position more explicitly in June 2005:

Although there has previously been discussion regarding bhikshuni [ordination], no decision has been reached. However, we need to bring this to a conclusion. We Tibetans alone can't decide this. Rather, it should be decided in collaboration with Buddhists from all over the world. (Quoted in Chodron 2005)

During the first Conference on Tibetan Buddhism in Europe two months later in Zurich, the Dalai Lama repeated the same opinion, but suggested that Western nuns should organize a committee and to carry out the work. He personally donated 50,000 Swiss francs to the cause (see Chinvarakorn 2007). His speech disappointed many conference participants who anticipated the Dalai Lama would deliver a more promising announcement regarding bhikkhuni ordination (Tomalin 2009).

To bridge the gap between women from different Buddhist traditions, the International Association of Buddhist Women, also known as Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha), was organized by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Ayya Khema, and Chatsumarn Kabilisinh in 1987. The association positions itself as the governing body of the international Buddhist women's movement. It has two major objectives: educating Buddhist women and restoring the bhikkhuni saṅgha (Fenn and Koppedrayar 2008). Through conferences and networking, the organization has promoted dialogue among Buddhist women from different cultures. Major issues remain, however. The association helped some Theravāda women receive bhikkhuni ordination through Korean nuns in 1996 and Taiwanese nuns in 1998 as "international" or "transnational" rather than Mahāyāna ordinations. Insisting on their Theravāda identity and integrity, none of these nuns consider themselves Mahāyāna, nor do they wear robes as in Korean or Chinese traditions (Tomalin 2009). However, their ordinations are not recognized by other Theravāda women, who ironically question the ordained nuns on which version of the Eight Heavy Rules the latter observe (Cheng 2007). The gap between the three traditions seems to have narrowed very little.

Cross-cultural differences may also be a problem for Sakyadhita's education objective. Buddhism attracts many upper-middle-class intellectuals in the Western world (beyond the diasporic Asian population). With the advantages in language (English hegemony) and training in feminist theory, Western Buddhist women appear to dominate the conversation, although some efforts to merge the needs of Western Buddhist women with those of their Asian sisters have been consciously cultivated. In studying Sakyadhita, some observers point out that the organization tends to "prioritize and reflect western feminist approaches and interests" and values Buddhist scholarship/theory over practice (Tomalin 2009, 94; Fenn and Koppedrayar 2008, 50). Although it may be unavoidable, the creation of a Western Buddhism might further divide Buddhism rather than promote unity. The needs for women in existing Buddhist traditions vary greatly. Whether Sakyadhita's current objectives can benefit all Buddhist women and whether it is even possible to promote one common agenda given the diverse nature of Buddhism and feminism remain to be seen.

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## Notes

1. This paper uses the pinyin system for Chinese names and phrases in English because it is the most commonly used system internationally. However, exceptions are made for those authors who prefer the Wade-Giles system with works published in English. In these cases, pinyin romanization of their names is provided in parentheses after the Wade-Giles romanization.

2. This paper generally uses Pali spelling for Buddhist terms except for in quotations and references, where I have retained the authors' original spellings.

3. Buddhism developed into three major schools. Theravāda is generally viewed as the oldest surviving Bud-

dhism and the school that most closely resembles the original Buddhism, with the most conservative theology and practice. It is popular in South and Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Mahāyāna is viewed as a reformed Buddhism with a relatively liberating ideal of gender equality. It became a mainstream movement in the fifth century and eventually spread northeast from India to East Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The third school of Buddhist thought is Vajrayāna, also known as Tantric Buddhism, practiced in Tibet, Mongolia, and Western China. It is an offshoot of Mahāyāna Buddhism and is classified as the fifth or the final period of Indian Buddhism.

4. For instance, there are 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns in Theravāda tradition; 253 for monks and 264 for nuns in Vajrayāna tradition; and 250 for monks and 348 for nuns in Mahāyāna tradition. Most additional rules are gender specific and thus apply only to nuns (see Tsedroen 2006; Tomalin 2009).

5. As indicated in the *Saṅgha Magazine's* website (<http://www.sanghamag.org>), the publication is for nuns and monks only. The general public has no direct access to the magazine. I therefore rely on Chao-hwei's account for the content of the story.

6. Buddhist feminists argue that the Eight Garudhammas resulted from the First Buddhist Council, held three months after the Buddha passed away. The Council's purpose was to safeguard the purity and orthodoxy of Buddhist doctrines and discipline. One result was the compilation of Buddhism's canon, which came to be especially important for Theravāda Buddhism. Five hundred arahant (enlightened monks) attended the meeting—neither nuns nor laypeople were invited. The conservative Mahākassapa, the principle disciple of Buddha, led the meeting and hand-picked the participants, against the more reform-minded Ānanda who was castigated for violating Brahmanical rules. Half of Ānanda's accused errors involved women (i.e., assistance in establishing the nuns' monastic order; permission given to women to pay respect to Buddha's body before men were allowed to do so; and assumed carelessness in not preventing women's teardrops from falling on the Buddha's body). In defending himself, Ānanda argued that Buddha instructed his disciples not to be confined by minor rules. Mahākassapa pressed for specification of such rules. The Buddha did not define them, Ānanda answered. Mahākassapa concluded that without specification from Buddha, no rule would be considered minor (see Laohavanich 2008).

7. Xuanzang (c. 602–664 CE) was probably the most well-known Chinese Buddhist monk in history. Ordained at the age of twenty, he spent much of his adult life searching for and translating Buddhist scriptures. In 629, he reportedly embarked on a seventeen-year overland pilgrimage to India. This journey later inspired Wu Cheng'en's (吳承恩) classic novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記).

8. Self-immolation is one form of body offering in Buddhism and has been practiced in Chinese Buddhism since the early medieval period. The *Lotus Sutta*, a major Mahāyāna scripture, contains probably the most famous case of self-immolation: the Bodhisattva Medicine King sets himself on fire to express his devotion to the Buddha. In this Sutta, the Buddha praises his action and opens up the practice to all. This story of auto-cremation has provided the scriptural inspiration and authority for the practice. In examining accounts of self-immolation in Chinese Buddhist history, Benn (2007) points out that Chinese Buddhists have believed that the practice is a selfless stimulus that evokes a cosmic response. The practice could (often simultaneously) produce at least three types of responses: the rulers responding to the needs of the people within human society, the cosmos responding to human's petitions, and the soul's (possibility of) becoming a Buddha. Benn argues that in the minds of many Buddhists, self-immolation is "far

from being a disrupting force, [but] an act that [is] supremely in harmony with the universe....” (Benn 2007, 6).

9. While Cheng deserves praise for giving voice to her nun informants, her failure to point out problems with such a quotation could lead to misunderstandings. First, anyone who pays attention to the controversy should have known how frequently Chao-hwei uses theory and Buddhist literature to support her claims. Second, a call for a conference to resolve the issue might not have been viable because the Buddhist hierarchy was still mostly controlled by males. Third, Chao-hwei does not dispute the sacredness of the Vinaya, but the quotation misses the central point she was trying to make: at least parts of the Eight Heavy Rules were not entirely laid down by the Buddha, but were a later addition to Buddhist literature. Fourth, the claim about the rights of the laity within the Buddhist community can be disputed (see above). Fifth, there are cases where few would dispute the need for outside interference in one's family affairs, particularly when domestic violence is involved. Sixth, Chao-hwei had been in the national arena for a few decades by the time of this incident and thus had accumulated fame for herself over the preceding years. Accusing her of using the event merely for her personal gain cannot be entirely justified.

10. This informant incorrectly includes the United States and Burma in Mahāyāna Buddhism and fails to understand that only Japanese Buddhism allows monks to have a married life.

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