

Book review

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Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns.

By Elise Anne DeVido. Albany, State University of New York Press. 2010. xvii+188 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-3148-2 (paper), \$24.95.

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B o o k R e v i e w

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About twenty years ago now, I began research for the work that would become my dissertation and first book, a general history of Buddhism in Taiwan. At every stage of the writing, those who read it, from my dissertation committee to the manuscript reviewers to the book reviewers, all commented that the vitality of the nuns' order in Taiwan and the fact that the nuns outnumbered the monks by a significant margin were some of the most fascinating findings, and many expressed the wish that these phenomena be covered in greater depth. I demurred from this project, having neither the time nor the skills to pursue it, and the need for such a study has persisted since then.

Now, at last, we have such a study, and it is both welcome and timely. Dr. Elise DeVido has spent many years residing in Taiwan, has had access to a great number of nuns, has worked and studied alongside them, and has brought a depth of experience and a basic feel for the topic that give her work the ring of truth.

The reader should be aware at the outset, though, that this is not a comprehensive and systematic study of Taiwan's Buddhist nuns. Except for the first and last two chapters, the subjects of individual chapters are more exemplary than comprehensive, and the nuns whose lives DeVido traces for us must stand in for their thousands of sisters living in Taiwan. The picture of nuns' lives, therefore, may or may not be representative of the whole.

Chapter one sketches a quick historical outline of nuns' orders in Taiwan from the Qing dynasty through the Japanese/Republican periods. DeVido criticizes earlier scholarship for relying a bit too naively on Japanese and Republican government surveys and other sources that tended to ignore nuns, giving the impression that they were few and insignificant. DeVido hints at sources that might yield a richer picture of the lives and activities of previous generations of nuns, but leaves it to future researchers to do the archival work necessary to bring this picture to an academic readership.

The next three chapters focus on Ven. Zhengyan 證嚴 and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association (*Fojiao Ciji gongde hui* 佛教慈濟功德會). Noting that Zhengyan and her organization have been the object of many studies, DeVido refrains from re-presenting too much material that is well known to specialists by now, and chooses to focus on different specific aspects of Zhengyan, her organization, and its work.

Chapter five deals with a nuns' organization very different and less well known than Ciji: the Luminary Buddhist Institute (*Xiangguang si* 香光寺). This institute, founded in 1980 by the

nun Wu Yin 悟因 (b. 1940), differs significantly in its fundamental outlook and programs from Ciji, and provides a nice counterpoint. Whereas Ciji trades on the charisma and absolute authority of its founder, Ven. Zhengyan, Luminary uses more modern, transparent methods of governance and management. While Ciji promotes traditional Confucian values and gender roles as part of a total social program, Luminary empowers women in a way more congruent with liberal western ideals (as in its program for tending to the needs of the increasing number of foreign brides residing in Taiwan). This is especially striking in Luminary's efforts to educate nuns to perform very socially visible services (DeVido points out that Ciji's nuns are almost invisible). Yet DeVido contends that the label "feminist" would not necessarily apply; Wu Yin does not claim it for her organization nor would an outside analyst consider it useful. Luminary nuns still talk about their vocations in terms that essentialize gender roles and portray women as inherently more suited to the monastic life (p. 88). We will revisit this point in our conclusions.

Chapter six looks further down the political spectrum to examine the life and work of Ven. Chao Hwei (*Zhao Hui* 昭慧), who has been much more of an advocate for structural change than either Zhengyan or Wu Yin. Chao Hwei (b. 1957) is a fascinating figure: an educator, social activist, street demonstrator, and agitator who still manages to stay relaxed and smile in the midst of all her endeavors. This chapter completes a cycle of presentations that progress from the eldest and most seemingly conservative of the prominent nuns of Taiwan (Zhengyan, b. 1937) to a more modern and centrist figure (Wu Yin, b. 1940), to the youngest and most progressive (Chao Hwei, b. 1957).

The last chapter brings back into focus the three questions that drive this book: How have women shaped Taiwan's Buddhism? How has Buddhism shaped the role and identity of Taiwanese women? How are Buddhist women shaping the future of Taiwanese Buddhism? The increasing level of education, sophistication, and empowerment of Buddhist nuns is giving them an expanding role in shaping Buddhism in Taiwan; they are a force too powerful and numerous to remain on the sidelines. The shift in their public perceptions, from losers in the marriage game seeking consolation in the monastic life to professionalized religious women pursuing meaningful ministries, provides younger women with adequate role models for their own consideration of possible religious life. Finally, the third question is answered by noting that Taiwan's Buddhist nuns have made great contributions toward the development of civil society in Taiwan, although one's assessment of the nuns' contributions in this area will depend upon which of several competing definitions of "civil society" one adopts (p. 115).

Throughout the book, DeVido notes that traditionally (and to this day in other parts of the Buddhist world), nuns remain in the kitchen, invisibly providing support to monks and laymen. While Taiwan's nuns have clearly broken with this pattern, the question of how "feminist" they are comes up time and again, and in answering this DeVido repeatedly calls attention to the way in which most of the nuns she spoke to for this book still held "essentialist" notions of gender roles. This assertion appears on page 113 in the concluding chapter, where DeVido states that this puts the nuns at odds with the agendas of many non-Buddhist NGOs that are working for social change and women's rights.

I might point out that modern feminism does not necessarily seek to flatten out gender differences. Rita Gross' long work in this area stresses that women and men *are* different, and

their differences matter; the problem is that patriarchalism tends to devalue the feminine as a kind of deviation from a male norm rather than as seeing it as the other way to be fully human. (Gross 1996, p. 17-21) Thus, the fact that the nuns of the Luminary Buddhist Institute still talk about differences between men and women and draw conclusions from these differences need not necessarily be a backward-looking essentialism, but can be congruent with a feminist outlook. Whether or not these nuns want to claim the word "feminist" for their views and work is another matter.

What I think DeVido gets exactly right is that Buddhist nuns and laywomen in Taiwan are at a point of transition. The nuns of the Japanese period (1895-1945) were fortunate that Buddhist monks saw their potential and drew them out of the kitchen and into the classroom, and nuns like Zhengyan and women of her generation probably needed something that gave the comfort of tradition amidst the rapid changes of the "Taiwan Miracle." But the social changes begun in the 1970s and 1980s are now near complete, and the young women of today do not need such bridging visions to get them from the village to the city, from the agricultural economy and extended family to the service and information economy and the nuclear family. The final development of a modern women's Buddhism in Taiwan is still a-borning, and scholars must keep watch to see what shape it will ultimately take.

All in all, this book makes a very worthwhile contribution to the study of women and religion, Buddhism in Taiwan, and the slowly-growing body of literature on Buddhist nuns. I recommend it highly for those interested in these topics.

Work Cited:

Gross, Rita M. 1996. *Feminism and Religion: an Introduction*. Boston: Beacon Press.