




Research Article

# Gender Roles in Transmitting Vietnamese Buddhism to Taiwan: Two Case-studies of Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns

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This paper introduces the works of two Vietnamese Buddhist nuns in Taiwan. They both envision a permanent or long-term stay in Taiwan and have purchased properties to function as their temples. They provide services to the Vietnamese diaspora. Special attention will be given to the discussion of gender role in the transmission of Vietnamese Buddhism to Taiwan and an assessment of what Buddhist feminist Rita Gross calls “the prison of gender role” in the works the nuns conduct.

**Keywords:** transnational Buddhism; gender role; Buddhist nuns; Vietnamese Buddhism; Rita Gross

**A**NALYZING the case studies of two Vietnamese nuns in Taiwan, I will discuss the feminist agitation of “the prison of gender roles” in the transmission of Vietnamese Buddhism to Taiwan. This research was prompted by my previous research on Vietnamese Buddhism in Taiwan. Throughout my fieldwork with Vietnamese Buddhist groups in Taiwan during the period between 2017 to 2019, I encountered an intriguing phenomenon: most Vietnamese rituals and groups I observed were headed by Vietnamese monks, and the nuns mostly played supporting roles in religious functions. For example, the nuns would work in the kitchen or assist the laity with participating in rituals, but rarely would they take seats on stage to preside over a ritual or to receive offerings from the lay devotees. Apparently, because of their gender, monks and nuns play different roles. Through the help of my informants, I was subsequently introduced to two Vietnamese nuns who head their own temples in Taiwan. They are the subjects of this study.

In Buddhism, because its founder, the male Buddha, is considered as the model of human perfection, it has been assumed that men are somehow more capable of awakening than women. Consequently, institutional patriarchy is common in traditional Buddhist cultures (Tsomo 2010: 482). Furthermore, there is a lack of records about women in Buddhist textual discourse, as feminist Rita Gross points out: “[. . .] for the most part, traditional Buddhism is relatively androcentric and [. . .] those who formulated the tradition and wrote the texts operated with an androcentric worldview . . .” (Gross 1993: 22). The lack of female role models in textual discourse means that Buddhist women are discouraged from seeking leadership roles and are given fewer educational opportunities than men. As a result, nuns become subordinate to monks in Buddhist institutions.

Rita Gross casts the imbalance of gender roles as “the prison of gender roles”: the culture that confines both men and women to conventional gender roles, constricts both genders from reaching their full potential, and is harmful to both men and women (Gross 2018: 21–69). According to Gross, denial of gender roles as a prison is often the first reaction: “[t]he [fact that] gender roles involve suffering is denied on the basis of purported traits shared by most or all members of each gender. These are often based in perceived biological certainties for each sex” (Gross 2018: 88). Gross indicates that because of the denial of gender roles as a prison, women in traditional Buddhist institutions (usually Asian) do not seek to subvert the androcentric structure



(Gross 2018: 107). As will be shown later, gender culture penetrates every aspect of the lives of Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan: whether it be their migration decisions or religious practice. On the other hand, the traditional Vietnamese Buddhist institutional structure does not exist in Taiwan and the two Vietnamese nuns discussed in this paper do not face the same patriarchal institutional constraints as they would otherwise face in Vietnam. One therefore wonders, as religious leaders of their own temples in Taiwan, do the two nuns seek to confront or even transform the so-called “prison of gender roles”? I will first introduce the gender culture behind the Vietnamese migration to Taiwan, then provide some background information about the two Vietnamese nuns and their works in Taiwan, and finally, discuss the “prison of gender role” in relation to the two case-studies.

### **Gender Culture in Vietnamese Migration to Taiwan**

Gender is the key determinant in every aspect of transmitting Vietnamese Buddhism to Taiwan, both in the secular dimension and in the religious dimension. At the outset, the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism has resulted in Taiwan and Vietnam sharing similar gender cultures. For example, in both Taiwan and Vietnam, household labor is usually considered as the wife’s duty and the husband is not expected to perform any household chore (for Vietnam, see Bussarawan, et al. 2010; for Taiwan, see Hu and Kamo 2007).

Gender clearly defines Vietnamese migration to Taiwan: while men dominate Vietnamese labor migration,<sup>1</sup> female migration is overwhelmingly dominated by transnational marriages.<sup>2</sup> Among the 206,500 Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan at the end of 2020, only 52,807 were women, and more than half of them worked in sectors related to health care and social service.<sup>3</sup> The statistic above suggests that the gender culture that traditionally prescribes the role of caregivers to women in both Vietnam and Taiwan also determines the types of employment available for Vietnamese migrant workers in Taiwan.

Taiwan and Vietnam share similar attitudes towards gender roles within the household. In Vietnam, men are perceived to be the financial backbone of the family and wives must defer to the husbands (T. Q. T. Nguyen and Simkin 2017). It is not uncommon for Taiwanese men in transnational marriage with Vietnamese women to wish their wives to be obedient, submissive, educationally inferior and socially and economically dependent on them (Tien and Wang 2006). This reflects the androcentrism in Taiwanese gender culture, in which the husband is imagined to be dominant and superior to the wife. It is not unheard of that Taiwanese husbands and their families deliberately isolate the Vietnamese wives and limit Vietnamese wives’ social movements simply for the purpose of maintaining a sense of masculine pre-eminence (Chen 2011: 64–83).

Gender culture also dominates religious discourse in both Taiwan and Vietnam. Since Vietnam adopted the market economy in the 1980s, Vietnam has witnessed a religious renaissance. In the effort of constructing a national identity, female deities in popular religion have come to be portrayed as representatives for Vietnamese national morality (Taylor 2004: 50–51). While the Confucian preference for fatherly authority is widespread in Vietnam, the mother goddess cults that are prevalent throughout Vietnam countervail the Confucian androcentrism (Phạm and Eipper 2009: 70–72).

Most householder participants in Vietnamese Buddhist rituals that I have observed are women. Such gender disparity might be the result of the different social acceptance of men and women’s religious performance.

<sup>1</sup> “Waiqiao Juliu Renshu—an guojibie, zhiyebie fen [number of foreign residents—divided by nationalities and occupations]”, National Statistics, Taiwan, <http://statis.moi.gov.tw/micst/stmain.jsp?sys=100&kind=10&type=1&funid=c09301&rdm=nV0ylWmq> (accessed 6 December 2019).

<sup>2</sup> “Waiji Peiou yu Dalu (han gangao) Peiou Renshu [number of foreign and mainland (including Hong Kong and Macau) spouses]”, Gender Equality Committee of Executive Yuan, Taiwan. [https://www.gender.ey.gov.tw/gecdb/Stat\\_Statistics\\_DetailData.aspx?sn=ljvq%2BGDSYHCFfHU73DDedA%3D%3D](https://www.gender.ey.gov.tw/gecdb/Stat_Statistics_DetailData.aspx?sn=ljvq%2BGDSYHCFfHU73DDedA%3D%3D) (accessed 6 December 2019).

<sup>3</sup> “Chanye ji Shefu Yigong Renshu an Guoji ji Xingbie fen [data for migrant labors in industries and health care/social service sectors—divided by nationalities and sexes]”, Ministry of Labor, Taiwan, <https://statdb.mol.gov.tw/evta/JspProxy.aspx?sys=210&kind=21&type=1&funid=wq1414&rdm=9b1eyeqe> (accessed 15 February 2021).

Soucy's ethnographic study in northern Vietnam finds that women comparatively show more religious devotion (2012: 60–78). Soucy attributes Vietnamese women's religious devotion to the concept of *lộc*. According to Soucy, the term and concept of *lộc* is very difficult to translate, for it contains the meanings of longevity, prosperity, and “gifts from gods” (2012: 81–82). Women making offerings to the Buddha or non-Buddhist deities to pray for *lộc* either for the purpose of finding a good husband (for single women) or for good fortune for the family (for married women) is a socially and culturally approved act (2012: 96–117) and “can be understood as part of the process of building and performing a feminine gender identity” (2012: 102). In Buddhist settings, Soucy finds that Vietnamese men stress self-cultivation while women stress the need for performing rituals on behalf of the entire family (2012: 170).

As in Vietnam, so does androcentric culture penetrate religious practice in Taiwan. At the core of Chinese religious practice in Taiwan stands ancestor worship, and it is in ancestor worship that androcentric gender culture is most apparent: a woman is not to be worshiped as a member of her natal family and can only be worshiped as a mother in her husband's patrilineal line (Wolf 1978). In the case of an unmarried woman, it is believed that she would return as a malicious ghost to haunt her family (Shih 2010: 125–29). In Chinese culture, a family needs a male heir to carry on the family name and worship the family shrine; the result is son preference, which constitutes one reason for Taiwanese men to seek Vietnamese wives (Chen 2011: 9–10).

Perhaps contradictorily, in this androcentric culture, the Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' order is vibrant and successful. Buddhist nuns in Taiwan are known to be independent agents. DeVido's (2010) *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns* documents exemplary Buddhist nuns in Taiwan who are independent, successful in their religious career, and head sizeable organizations. Jones credits the lift of Martial Law in 1987, the subsequent removal of the centralized Buddhist authority and the implementation of religious freedom for the pluralization of Buddhism in Taiwan (1999: 179–83). The absence of a centralized Buddhist authority has had two probable effects on the two Vietnamese in this study. Firstly, it has allowed different forms and traditions of Buddhism to develop in Taiwan including Vietnamese Buddhist groups. Secondly, the absence of a centralized Buddhist authority means that nuns in Taiwan, including the two Vietnamese nuns in this study, are not constricted politically by the monks' order and therefore have more freedom to strive. Other societal factors such as the growing proportion of Taiwanese students born to at least one Vietnamese parent<sup>4</sup> and the government's “new southbound policy” (implemented in 2017 to encourage economic integration with Southeast Asia) (Yang 2017), would have also created a more friendly environment for the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in Taiwan. The complexity of this social-political context has not been adequately noted by liberal feminists such as Rita Gross.

### **Background: Two Case Studies**

The Vietnamese Buddhist groups in my previous studies are loosely structured, and in rituals hosted by those groups, monks take the lead and nuns assist in the background. While these Vietnamese monks, who are mostly in Taiwan as students, have built up successful congregations in Taiwan, their long-term aspirations tend to be migration to the West or returning to Vietnam upon the completion of their education in Taiwan; none of the Vietnamese monk informants told me that they envision a permanent or long-term stay in Taiwan. I therefore wonder, how about Vietnamese nuns? The two nuns discussed here have established their own religious organizations in Taiwan and, contrary to the monks, envision a permanent or long-term stay in Taiwan.

<sup>4</sup> See “109 Xueniandu Geji Xuexiao Xinzhumun Zinu Jiuxue Gaikuang [general report of students at all levels born to new immigrant parents in the academic year 109]”, 30 November 2021, Ministry of Education, Republic of China (Taiwan), [https://stats.moe.gov.tw/files/analysis/109\\_son\\_of\\_foreign\\_ana.pdf](https://stats.moe.gov.tw/files/analysis/109_son_of_foreign_ana.pdf), accessed on 18 January 2022.

I will code the first nun as Ven. Hật (born in 1965). As much as I think Ven. Hật's story is worth telling and her name deserves to be known—given that Ven. Hật is recognized by my other Vietnamese informants as the first Vietnamese Buddhist monastic to provide religious service to the Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan—she asked to remain anonymous. She explains that she wishes to be modest and not attract too much attention. The following information is based on an interview at her temple, in New Taipei City, on 7 January 2019, and a follow-up interview, on 19 February 2021. However, I have known Ven. Hật prior to this study for nearly two decades. We are both closely affiliated with a Taiwanese Buddhist nunnery, where I have friends and she attends *upavasatha* (the recitation of the Vinaya rules) every half month.

Ven. Hật became a nun at the age of eighteen and went on to study at a monastic college in Ho Chi Minh City. Upon graduation, her tonsure master encouraged her to come to Taiwan to study Chinese: “Many people are engaged in translating the Tripitaka [from Chinese to Vietnamese] now. But, back then, no one was doing the translation work. So, she wanted me to come [to Taiwan] to study Chinese and do the translation work.” Ven. Hật came to Taiwan in 1998, first to study in a language center and then to pursue a university degree. After the completion of her M.A. degree in 2007, she initially intended to migrate to Australia where her tonsure master had friends. But on a flight from Taiwan to Vietnam, she met a pair of Vietnamese sisters who had married Taiwanese men. The sisters told her of the hardship they had endured in their marriages. Feeling sorry for the sisters, Ven. Hật decided to stay in Taiwan in order to provide service to Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan. By 2019, she had run her own temple for nearly eight years and became a naturalized citizen of Taiwan. By 2020, she had purchased an old four-story building to function as her temple in New Taipei City.

Another case study is the nun Ven. Thuần Tĩnh (born 1976)<sup>5</sup>. Information in this paper is based on my interview with her at her temple in New Taipei City on 12 April 2019 and a follow-up interview on 5 February 2021, as well as my participation in religious functions at her branch temple in Yilan County during the period of November 2018 to May 2019, and on 28 March 2021 for the opening ceremony of her new temple in New Taipei City. Like Ven. Hật, she also initially came to Taiwan to study Chinese (in 2010) but stayed in Taiwan longer than expected. At the beginning of this research, she was pursuing a Ph.D. degree in Taiwan (completed in August 2021) while running a Buddhist organization of her own in northern Taiwan.

During Ven. Thuần Tĩnh's undergraduate years in Taiwan, some of her Vietnamese monastic schoolmates founded a Vietnamese Buddhist group in New Taipei City. But realizing that her fellow Vietnamese schoolmates' group was not officially registered with the Ministry of Interior in Taiwan, she decided to found an organization of her own, namely the *Association for Buddhist Exchange between Taiwan and Vietnam* (*Chùa Việt Nam Đài Loan* in Vietnamese; *Taiyue Fojiao Jiaoliu Xiehui* 台越佛教交流協會 in Chinese). It is interesting to note that in Vietnamese, the word “*chùa*” (pagoda) is used while in Chinese, the word “*xiehui*” (association) is used. The word “*chùa*” has a more religious connotation and more easily attracts Vietnamese devotees. Ven. Thuần Tĩnh says, “It (her place) doesn't look like a temple from the outside, but inside it is a temple”. Her organization seems to be thriving. In 2019, her organization purchased two properties, one in New Taipei City and one in Yilan County, to function as Buddhist temples. And, in March 2021, the temple in New Taipei City was moved to a new location which, owing to the contributions of devotees, is bigger.

Ven. Thuần Tĩnh seems to have fared well in Taiwan, as she was able to sponsor another Vietnamese Buddhist nun to come to Taiwan in 2018 (and she sponsored one more Vietnamese nun to come to Taiwan in 2020) for the purpose of assisting her in religious service. For a ritual I attended in her Yilan branch temple, several local politicians showed up to greet the nuns and devotees.<sup>6</sup> Although it is obvious that those Taiwanese politicians

<sup>5</sup> Ven. Thuần Tĩnh has given me her permission to use her real name for this paper. And she reviewed the draft of this section. I also offered Ven. Hật the draft of this section for review but she declined.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork note, 18 November 2018.

were only there to attract voters, since it was election time and none stayed for longer than ten minutes, the presence of Taiwanese politicians still testifies to Ven. Thuận Tịnh's success in nourishing a good relationship with the Taiwanese establishment. This can also be seen from another occasion: the opening ceremony of Ven. Thuận Tịnh's new temple on 28 March 2021. She made a point of thanking the Taiwanese contractor who refurbished her new temple in her speech. Among the approximately one hundred attendees that day, only a handful were Taiwanese. Despite this small number, Ven. Thuận Tịnh still gave a speech in Mandarin in addition to the sutra-chanting and speech in Vietnamese.

The two case studies share many similarities. Unlike other Vietnamese monks in my previous studies, who also provide religious services to Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan but do not envision long-term stay in Taiwan, both nuns have purchased properties in New Taipei City and have a long-term plan for staying and serving Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan. One explanation for this discrepancy is the traditional preference for monk-leadership in Buddhism, in spite of the Buddha's affirmation of women's capacity to achieve liberation (Tsomo 1999: 4–9). This point has not escaped Ven. Hật's attention:

Let me tell you frankly. All the monks have devotees waiting to sponsor them in the Western countries. But not the nuns.

Given the better prospect for monks in Vietnam or the Western countries, it is conceivable that Vietnamese monks would rather seek opportunities elsewhere than to stay in Taiwan. It is also possible that Vietnamese monks do not adjust to Taiwan as well as the nuns, for moving to Taiwan means the loss of patriarchal privilege. Research has found that Vietnamese male migrants have more difficulties adjusting to a new country than female migrants because patriarchal privilege and masculinities are threatened in the new environment (Kibria 1990; Barber 2015); the same might be said about the monks.

In the next section, I will discuss the gender culture in Vietnam and Taiwan that might have influenced my informants' lives before moving on to discuss “the prison of gender roles”.

### **Religious Service**

Most devotees at both nuns' temples are women. Gender culture as discussed above influences the services provided by the two nuns.

To begin with, empathy with Vietnamese wives in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages is given as the main motivation for both nuns to stay in Taiwan. Ven. Hật says:

[The Vietnamese women] come to Taiwan at very young age, in their twenties; some are barely twenty but most are in their twenties . . . Why did they enter the marriage? Maybe their families back in Vietnam are in debt, or they have younger brothers who are still in school, or a sick father . . . There are many reasons. Most of them come from rural areas . . . Honestly speaking, they are here to send money home . . . Filial piety is the main cause. They sacrifice themselves to come to Taiwan. Real happiness is difficult to obtain. We are all women [so I can understand their struggle better than monks].

The statement above shows Ven. Hật's empathy with the female Vietnamese diaspora (“we are all women”). It also reveals her understanding of the emotional deprivation of Vietnamese women in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages (“Real happiness is difficult to obtain”) and the exploitation they suffer under patriarchy (“[. . .] or they have younger brothers who are still in school, or a sick father”). She believes that by staying in Taiwan to provide religious service for the Vietnamese diaspora, she can provide social and emotional support for those women.

Most of the devotees of the two nuns' temples are Vietnamese women in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages. The two nuns interpret this as the result of long-working hours of migrant laborers, because migrant laborers might have less free time to participate in religious service. While men dominate labor migration to Taiwan, statistics show that Vietnamese women dominate Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages.<sup>7</sup> Both nuns claim that they decided to stay in Taiwan because of their encounters with Vietnamese wives in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages.

The efforts to care for the female Vietnamese diaspora can be seen from the service held on the second day of Lunar New Year at both nuns' temples. In Chinese culture, the second day of Lunar New Year is the day when married daughters visit their natal families (Hong 2003: 39) and having a religious service on this specific day carries symbolic meaning. Not only does it signal to the Vietnamese migrant women that the nuns' temples could be their natal homes in Taiwan, it also signals to their Taiwanese husbands' families that the Vietnamese wives have a social safety net to fall back on. In fact, both nuns say that their service for the Vietnamese diaspora goes beyond religious service: sometimes they must give legal, social, or financial advice to the Vietnamese diaspora, especially to Vietnamese migrant women in abusive marriages. It becomes necessary for the nuns to cultivate a good relationship with the local establishment so that they know where to turn to for assistance in time of need. Thus, designating their temples as the symbolic natal homes for the Vietnamese migrant women has both symbolic and actual benefit.

Ven. Hật furthermore expresses concern for Vietnamese wives' morality:

I will tell you the reason why I started this temple. [These Vietnamese women in transnational marriages] came to Taiwan and are desperate. Then they meet other women [in the same situation] and they get together. They begin to chat, and then to go to karaoke, smoke, drink alcohol, gamble, all because they feel depressed . . . Vietnamese brides come to Taiwan but they cannot understand why they are in such a bad situation.

Ven. Hật claims that her mission is to take care of Vietnamese diaspora and to lead the otherwise directionless diaspora onto the right path of Dharma. She perceives herself as a maternal figure to the Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan and she wants to create a warm and welcoming symbolic natal home for the Vietnamese diaspora as well as to teach them Dharma. She admits:

I see the devotees as my own children. Sometimes they would ask to hug me. "Master, we love you," they would say.

Ven. Hật believes that, as a woman, she has a better understanding of other women's hardship. Ven. Thuần Tịnh shares the same sentiment and says that Vietnamese women seek her out for help and advice because she is also a woman and has a better understanding of other women's problems. This kind of empathy towards other Vietnamese women is less emphasized by my other monk informants, who are more likely to articulate the agenda of Dharma propagation as their motive for providing religious service in Taiwan.

In order to provide more personal care to the Vietnamese diaspora, both nuns opt for more personal religious service. Ven. Hật usually stays away from large-scale rituals, for she claims to prefer small but regular (religious) gatherings in her temple in order to provide more personal support for the Vietnamese diaspora. According to her, she has little interest in sangha leadership but only wishes to care for the less-privileged. The one exception was an event in 2019 which she streamed live via social media. For this event, she invited more than five hundred Vietnamese migrant women in transnational marriages to recount their stories of hardship in Taiwan. She streamed the event live because "I wanted [the Vietnamese migrant women's]

<sup>7</sup> "Statistics", National Immigration Agency, Ministry of Interior, Taiwan (R.O.C.), accessed on 16 February 2021, <https://www.immigration.gov.tw/5385/7344/7350/8887/?alias=settledown>.

families back in Vietnam to know their stories and their destitution in Taiwan, so that the parents won't pressure their daughters to send remittances home." In recounting their stories, almost all women were brought to tears. In Chinese culture, in Taiwan, it is the sons' duty to look after the parents, but in Vietnamese culture, daughters also have the obligation to care for their parents. This cultural difference often causes conflicts in a Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriage in which Taiwanese family members do not have sympathy for or understanding of their Vietnamese family member's wish to send remittance to her natal family (Chen 2011: 92–93). The event organized by Ven. Hật aims at bridging this cultural difference.

Among the religious services that the two nuns provide are occasions such as the one-day observation of Eight Precepts (Vietnamese: *bát quan trai giới*; Sanskrit: *aṣṭāṅga-śīla*), Lunar New Year Dharma function and Sunday service, small in scale (fewer than one hundred attendees) but with important social-religious significance. Those religious services create an ethnoscape that mimics the cultural environment in the home country (Appadurai 1996: 33–34) and where the Vietnamese diaspora can imagine to be back in Vietnam. These religious services not only provide religious, cultural comfort but also an opportunity for the Vietnamese diaspora to socialize and to build up a social network in Taiwan. Additionally, Ven. Hật organizes outings with her devotees to visit other Buddhist sites and to conduct volunteer work (e.g. cleaning temples, public park or school). There are two dimensions to Ven. Hật's interpretation of those outings. With regards to the secular dimension, she recognizes that those outings will uplift her devotees' spirit from their tedious daily routines and form a supportive network among them. As for the religious dimension, she interprets those outings as Dharma practice; that is, it allows her devotees to cultivate morality and compassion and to accumulate karmic merit.

Ven. Thuận Tịnh too provides small-in-scale but regular religious services at her temples. One notable religious activity provided by Ven. Thuận Tịnh is the monthly pilgrimage to a renowned Buddhist temple, Cheng Tian Ch'an Temple,<sup>8</sup> in the outskirts of Taipei. Cheng Tian Ch'an Temple is a popular Buddhist pilgrimage site. Its founder, Master Guang Qin (1892–1986), born in Fujian Province, in southeast China, entered the sangha as a child and was famous for his ascetic practice. There are many legends about Master Guang Qin's religious achievement; for example, how he ate only fruits and was accompanied by a tiger while meditating in a cave. In 1947, Master Guan Qin migrated to Taiwan and subsequently established himself as an influential and well-respected Pure Land<sup>9</sup> monk.<sup>10</sup> In this pilgrimage, the pilgrims walk three steps and then kneel down to prostrate before getting up and repeating the whole process again until they reached the temple on top of the hill. The whole pilgrimage path is a little bit more than 900 meters long. According to Ven. Thuận Tịnh, it was her devotees rather than she herself who initiated the monthly pilgrimage:

The first time was because I told them about the Old Monk,<sup>11</sup> there's something about his story that we can learn from; for example, why he became a monk, or why he came to Taiwan to propagate Dharma and the hardship he endured . . . There is one more point. The Old Monk is not [a Taiwanese] . . . We are also foreigners, so we can learn from him . . . They can accumulate merit for themselves or transfer the merit to other people.

The story of a migrant monk is inspiring for the Vietnamese diaspora, since they can identify themselves with a migrant's story in Taiwan. Although the pilgrimage is physically demanding, the idea of generating merit

<sup>8</sup> Information about Cheng Tian Ch'an Temple in this paper is cited from the official website of Cheng Tian Ch'an Temple, <https://www.ctbm.org.tw/>, accessed 12 December 2020 ~ 20 January 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Master Guang Qin was said to be illiterate and mostly taught his devotees to chant Amitābha Buddha's name, a common Pure Land practice. Hence, despite the fact that the name of the temple he founded includes the word 'Ch'an', Master Guang Qin is known as a Pure Land monk.

<sup>10</sup> Information about Master Guang Qin is cited from Cheng-tsung Kan, "Guang Qin Fa Shih" [Master Quang Qin], Digital Museum of Buddhism in Taiwan, <http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/museum/formosa/people/1-guang-qin.html>, accessed 12 December 2020.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Old Monk' refers to Master Guang Qin.

from this pilgrimage (and therefore hope for a better rebirth in the future) and/or transferring the merit to loved ones is appealing for women who have suffered much in this life. The monthly pilgrimage regularly attracts a busload of (mostly female) devotees.

Ven. Thuận Tịnh recounts one story about the women's interest in pilgrimage:

Sometimes they are unable to provide for their children so they choose abortion. What else can they do? They are just desperate . . . So they go on the pilgrimage to transfer the merit [gained from the pilgrimage] to their aborted children. And that place is a Buddhist temple. If there is karmic connection, the children can [learn Dharma]. The scenery there is very beautiful. If the children like it there, they can stay there and not live a hard life with their mothers.

Ven. Thuận Tịnh does not mention special religious services for unborn fetuses as found in Japanese Buddhism,<sup>12</sup> but the story above reveals the hardship that Vietnamese women endure in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages and the appealing reason for those women to participate in Buddhist service.

Although the majority of devotees at the two nuns' temples are Vietnamese migrant women, there are few men and most of the men are Vietnamese migrant laborers. The two nuns utilize the stereotyped masculine gender role to attract male devotees. Ven. Hật has successfully attracted about two dozen male migrant workers to her congregation. To do so, she plans her activities at least one month in advance so that male migrant laborers can apply for leave from work on the day of the activity. She would purposely ask male migrant laborers to participate in volunteering outings: "Men are stronger, so they can do physically demanding work." She stresses that it is a way to keep male migrant laborers away from immoral activities such as gambling, drinking, etc. on their days off. Ven. Hật assesses that her male devotees are happy to engage in volunteer work because it gives them a sense of giving back to society. Similarly, Ven. Thuận Tịnh says: "I would ask a woman's Taiwanese husband to come to help with heavy-lifting work. Little by little, I made them interested in Buddhist practice." The use of stereotyped gender roles may not satisfy liberal feminists, but two nuns have successfully utilized the stereotype to attract male devotees.

Many of the Vietnamese female devotees of the two nuns are mothers. Anthropological reports show that Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan face discrimination, and their ability to be good mothers is often unjustifiably questioned by their Taiwanese families, primarily because of the perceived lower educational level and these women's lower economic status. In order to prove themselves, Vietnamese migrant women strive to increase their money earning capacity and Mandarin fluency (Chen 2011: 195–97; Huynh and Huynh 2020). The two nuns are aware of this discrimination and work to involve Taiwanese husbands. They recognize the importance of including the Vietnamese migrant women's Taiwanese husbands in their religious service, even though the husbands may resist and the number of Taiwanese devotees in the two nuns' temples remains small: fewer than a dozen in each nun's temple. Ven. Hật says of her devotees' Taiwanese husbands:

At the beginning, they are not happy [for their Vietnamese wives] to come here. At the beginning, the husbands do not want their wives to come. Some husbands would complain to me, so I would explain [what we do here] to them. They also observe their wives. Their wives changed . . . At first, [the husbands] waited outside; gradually, they entered the temple and now some of them would join [the Dharma functions] and would greet me with "Amitabha Buddha" . . . When you change, your family will become better.

Ven. Thuận Tịnh gives a similar statement:

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Japanese ritual for aborted children, see Wilson, Jeff. 2009. "Mizuko kuyō in the abortion cultural wars: The rhetorical appropriation of Japanese Buddhism by non-Buddhist Americans." *Religion* 39(1): 11–21.



Most of [my Dharma functions] are in Vietnamese. If there is a need, I will use Mandarin. I wish the husband and wife can come together. But [the husbands] just want their wives to learn [Dharma] and not themselves. But I want them to know what their wives are learning here, so I will speak to them in Mandarin . . . If their wives find [Dharma] interesting, they will also know [about Dharma]. If [the husband] is smart and asks questions, I will specially give him a Dharma talk.

Both nuns reason that by including Taiwanese husbands in the temple activities, regardless of whether the husbands are Buddhists, their Vietnamese female devotees' family life will be improved.

Ven. Hật goes a step further by paying special attention to children in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages:

Some children do not have a good family upbringing, so I founded a "kids' three good team". First, you be good to your parents, second you be good to your friends, and third you should have a good heart . . . I organize some kids' programs here . . . I use Dharma to teach them. Let them be self-reliant and not dependent on their parents. I want them to have a "if you can do it, I can do it too" attitude . . . Children may be small but they already know discrimination. Their classmates may say, "Your mother is a Vietnamese" . . . They come almost every week . . . Mothers come to participate in Buddha's name chanting, their kids come to participate in this Three Good team.

Ven. Thuần Tịnh may not offer specific programs to children in Vietnam-Taiwan transnational marriages, but she recognizes that the services she organizes help to build confidence in Vietnamese migrant women. Therefore, the two nuns may not articulate any feminist agenda, but by providing service to the Vietnamese diaspora they empower Vietnamese migrant women.

### **Women's Agency and Maternal Image**

The two case-studies in this paper raise questions regarding liberal feminist assumptions about women's roles in a religious context. We can see gender subordination performed through the two nuns discussed in this paper. That is, despite of their success in their religious career in Taiwan, both nuns are careful not to take up the leadership role outside of their own congregations and both prefer to defer to monks, especially in important and large-scale rituals. In the Vu Lan ceremony in 2019, Ven. Thuần Tịnh chose to invite a group of monks from Vietnam to preside over the ceremony rather than host the ceremony on her own. Only in 2020, because of the travel restrictions imposed in response to the covid pandemic making it difficult for Vietnamese monks to travel to Taiwan, Ven. Thuần Tịnh hosted a small scale (i.e. approximately 40 attendees) Vu Lan ceremony in her temples with her fellow nuns. The preference for monks is intriguing. The absence of a Vietnamese Buddhist establishment in Taiwan should imply fewer patriarchal obstacles and more opportunities for the nuns to take up sangha leadership. However, such an assumption is disputed by the nuns. Ven. Hật says it very bluntly: "I would rather have a [Vietnamese Buddhist] establishment here in Taiwan. Without senior monastics, it's difficult to have good guidance." She adds, "Dharma makes no distinction between maleness and femaleness. My [religious] service is the same for both men and women." Ven. Thuần Tịnh interprets her invitation to monks for the Vu Lan ceremony as "respect". She says, "We are already in a foreign land. What is the point of distinguishing between men and women?" There is no hint of challenging patriarchal institutions in either of the nuns' statements.

Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of the women in the mosque movement in Egypt is useful here. While women's practice of bodily performance in Mahmood's study seems to be submissive to the patriarchal social-religious norm, it would be wrong to see them as powerless victims. Saba Mahmood suggests to analyze women's agency in "multiple modalities" and to question "issues of performativity, transgression, suffering, survival

and the articulation of the body within different conceptions of the subject” (2005: 188); in other words, to not conceptualize agency as “the binary model of subordination and subversion” (2005: 14). Similarly, both nuns’ preference for monk leadership is neither subordination nor subversion but rather strategic. Being foreigners in Taiwan, the two nuns have limited resources to begin with; antagonizing the monk sangha would further constrict their agency and their agenda of caring for the Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan. It is important to remember that the two nuns did not come to Taiwan for feminist transformation of Buddhism; by their own accounts, they stayed in Taiwan to serve the Vietnamese diaspora, especially the women. Given the hardship and discrimination that Vietnamese migrant women endure in Taiwan, a feminist transformation of Buddhism is probably not as urgent as solving difficulties in real life. Through the nuns’ years of building up a social network in Taiwan, they are able to provide practical advice in regards to legal and other matters.

It is also important to remember the two nuns’ capacity to act as independent agents. Ven. Thuận Tịnh may have invited monks from Vietnam to preside over important rituals such as Vu Lan, but for their other activities, the two nuns rarely invite monks to participate. The opening ceremony of Ven. Thuận Tịnh’s new temple on 28 March 2021, for example, was attended only by Ven. Thuận Tịnh, her two Vietnamese nun colleagues and householders. This is not a result of the travel restrictions caused by the covid pandemic, since there are Vietnamese monks residing in Taiwan who could have been invited for the ceremony, rather it is a sign of Ven. Thuận Tịnh being an independent agent. The two nuns may not seek leadership outside their own congregation or voice feminist agitation, but their temples function independently from the male sangha. They are able to realize their interests and those of the Vietnamese diaspora. By saying that the two nuns comply with traditional gender roles and therefore are locked up in “the prison of gender roles” is too simplistic and neglects the autonomy the nuns have.

In addition, it is too simplistic to conceptualize agency as “the binary model of subordination and subversion” (Mahmood 2005: 14). For example, even though women and men may be assigned traditionally prescribed gender roles in Taiwanese Buddhist settings, anthropologists find the implication of this different from doing the same gender-prescribed roles within the household. That is, women volunteering in Buddhist settings are met with appreciation, while doing the same domestic chores such as cooking at home is seen as women’s duty and goes unacknowledged. In other words, participating in Buddhist settings gives women autonomy and empowerment outside home, even if the women still perform the same domestic chores as they would within the household (Huang and Weller 1998: 386–89; Li 2000: 323–30). Similarly, the two nuns in this paper exercise their agency not in terms of nonconformity nor direct challenge to patriarchy, but in a subtle and tactical way that may not be seen by liberal feminists as women’s agency for transforming patriarchy but rather, in Mahmood’s definition of agency, “the capacity to realize *one’s own interests*<sup>13</sup> against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (2005: 8).

Another interesting point is the maternal image that the two nuns embody. Ohnuma’s (2012) book *Ties that Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* illustrates the special status given to the maternal role in early Indian Buddhist literature: motherhood is valued and maternal gifts are essential to the Buddha’s spiritual path. The success of Theravada Buddhism in early Southeast Asia may be attributed to the frequent appearance of maternal metaphors in Theravada texts, which makes Theravada Buddhism appealing to women (Andaya 2002). Thousands of years later, one of the largest Taiwanese Buddhist organizations, Tzu Chi (*ciji* in pinyin), emphasizes the value of motherhood and urges its female members “to extend their family values and roles to the wider society, and to forge a new identity as mother to the world (Huang and Weller 1998: 386).” The traditional Vietnamese Buddhist ritual Vu Lan (usually translated into English as “ghost festival”) is celebrated as “Mothers’ Day” in contemporary Vietnam (Cheng 2020: 11). It seems that mothers

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis by me.

are revered in Buddhist cultures across space and time. The two nuns' maternal image is thus understandable and appreciated in a Buddhist context.

One is tempted to perceive the two nuns' maternal image as being stuck in the "prison of gender role" because of feminist criticism of traditional motherhood (e.g. Beauvoir 1953: 467–504). But the two nuns' maternal image amounts to more than performing a mothering role in patriarchy. Feminist Judith Butler argues that gender is a performance, "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (2002: 178). Conceptualizing gender as a performance opens up the possibility for reading motherhood as diverse practices. Traditional Vietnamese motherhood values reproduction, motherly devotion, self-sacrifice, and womanly virtues for womanhood (Hoang 2016: 893–94); the pressure of being a good mother is such that Vietnamese migrant mothers in Taiwan will go to great lengths to portray themselves as "sacrificing and enduring mothers" (Hoang 2016: 906). The two nuns, however, do not conform themselves to traditional motherhood: they walk away from reproduction and function as independent agents.

Andrea O'Reilly's suggestion of "empowered motherhood" offers a better understanding of the two nuns' maternal image. Empowered motherhood is to practice mothering "from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy" and defines "motherhood as a political site" (O'Reilly 2016: 142) in order to bring about social change. Empowered motherhood is different from feminist motherhood, for feminist motherhood requires a "feminist identification or consciousness" (O'Reilly 2016: 141) which the two nuns do not possess. Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan have more than patriarchy to contend with; they also face racism and classism, to the degree that their ability to be good mothers is consistently questioned by their Taiwanese families (Huynh and Huynh 2020). The religious and social services provided by the two nuns build up a support network that empowers Vietnamese migrant women. Therefore, it is more appropriate to read the two nuns' mothering as empowered motherhood rather than them being imprisoned in the gender role of mothering.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking the Prison of Gender Role**

The case studies of Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuận Tịnh's works in Taiwan reveal that Rita Gross' theory of "prison of gender role" is too simplistic, lacking the necessary contextualization. Feminist and philosopher Hsio-lan Hu criticizes Gross for being "white feminist" and biased against Asians:

Rita *corrected* me, in her usual tone of correcting my pronunciation of English words, by saying, "Here, by 'minority' we mean blacks; we don't mean you. We have been treating your people rather well, I think." (Hu 2019: 298)

This bias against Asians renders Rita Gross' feminism unable to address the complexity and diversity of Asian cultures. Gross denies Asian women's capability of being agents of their own and asserts that Asian women rely on the West for the possibility of androgynous Buddhism:

In Asia, feminist or women studies movements in Buddhism are small and often led by Western or by Western-educated Asian women. Often the (male) hierarchies, both scholarly and religious, of the Asian Buddhist world are indifferent or hostile to these movements (Gross 1993: 19).

This point can be seen from the two case studies under consideration. Firstly, the nuns act as independent agents. Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuận Tịnh's works in Taiwan are mostly conducted without involvement or constriction by the monk sangha. Their maternal role with respect to their Vietnamese devotees should not be read as an 'imprisoned gender role' but rather as empowerment to the Vietnamese diaspora.

Rita Gross' tendency to generalize ethnic and cultural diversity can be seen from her own writing:

The Asian models were totally ignored, to the extent that it has been suggested that the single biggest difference between Asian and Western Buddhism is the active and equal involvement of women in all aspects of Buddhist practice (Gross 1993: 219).

Despite of the wide difference in ethnicity and cultures across Asian and Western countries, Gross portrays “Asian” and “Western” as two simple, generalizable categories. The obedient Asian women in Gross’ feminism would not act as independent agents as Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuần Tịnh do.

In addition, there are more cultural elements at play than simply androcentrism. Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuần Tịnh are well respected among my Vietnamese informants. This is especially true in the case of Ven. Hật. Being biologically older and the most senior Vietnamese monastic in Taiwan, my Vietnamese monk informants always speak of her with reverence. This can be attributed to the Vietnamese culture of respecting elderly and teachers (Q. T. N. Nguyen 2016: 35–36), for Ven. Hật is considered as a teacher and a role model for transmitting Vietnamese Buddhism to Taiwan by my Vietnamese monk informants.

Gross argues that to establish androgynous Buddhism, one should ask the following questions:

Are all the head teachers men? Do women lead the chanting as often as men? Who sits on the governing bodies? Who does the childcare? Are there female gurus? Are nuns supported as well as monks are? Are the nuns subjected to any diminished status or demeaning rules of behavior? Does everyone have the same opportunity for education and for advanced training in meditation? Or is one sex routinely taking on gender-related tasks that keep them from such education or training in meditation (1993: 221)?

In the cases of Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuần Tịnh, they certainly meet the criteria above. They have seemingly achieved Gross’ agenda for androgynous Buddhism without openly adopting a feminist identity. The absence of a central sangha authority in Taiwan implies that the monk sangha does not have absolute institutional power: Buddhist groups are free to thrive in Taiwan and nuns can be successful (see DeVido 2010). It is true that monks are preferred to preside over important rituals, and within a dual-sexed sangha androcentric hierarchy usually follows. But Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuần Tịnh have their own temples and they act as independent agents without having to subjugate themselves to monks.

While there may be competition for devotees among different Vietnamese Buddhist groups in Taiwan, I do not sense a tense competition. As my previous research shows, Vietnamese monastics may assist one another’s groups and many Vietnamese migrants do not limit their attendance of religious service to a single group. I also have not met a single Vietnamese monk who envisions permanent or long-term stay in Taiwan. Only on rare occasions may monks be invited to participate or preside over a Dharma function in the two nuns’ temples. Ven. Hật and Ven. Thuần Tịnh exercise their agency independently most of the time and they maintain an apparently good relationship with Vietnamese monks in Taiwan.

The tendency to generalize the complexity and diversity of Asian cultures and the stereotyping of Asian women have weakened Rita Gross’ otherwise powerful feminist agitation. The two nuns discussed in this paper have not adopted a feminist agenda of subverting patriarchy but have used strategic methods to exercise their agency; in so doing, they empower Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan. It is unfortunate that Gross’ theory of “the prison of gender role” lacks the necessary contextualization and appreciation for successful and independent Asian women agents.

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