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Grant/Eminent Nuns

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CHAPTER ONE

Setting the Stage

Seventeenth-Century Texts and Contexts

Every reader of premodern Chinese fiction, and indeed of medieval and early modern Western fiction as well, is probably familiar with the image of nuns (usually depicted as being both young and beautiful) who, left unsupervised by male kin behind surprisingly permeable convent walls, become either hapless sexual prey or seductive vampires.¹ Nonfictional sources, such as legal cases and miscellaneous records of various kinds, also tended to focus on the slanderous, the sensational, or the simply curious. In fact, for all their cultural and theological differences, this is the one thing that Buddhist nuns shared with their Catholic counterparts in premodern Europe: the sheer difficulty of escaping, whether in their own eyes or in the eyes of the world, their anomalous status. Whether associated with the absolute purity of the Virgin Mary or the lustful concupiscence of the harlot, such women were always—in the words of Jo Ann Kay McNamara, author of a history of Catholic nuns over two millennia—an “embarrassing anomaly,” which in part explains why “[p]eer pressure, slander, seduction, and rape have been mobilized to neutralize women who choose a life without sex.”² As early as 1896, Lina Eckenstein in her book *Women under Monasticism* notes with dismay the ubiquitous medieval depictions of the nun as “a slothful and hysterical,” not to mention “dissolute,” character.³

In China, as in the West, a religious vocation has always been one of many—and perhaps even the least—of motivations behind women entering a convent. More often than not, in a time and place that afforded few other options for women, the convent was a last resort for those with family, health, or economic problems that could not be otherwise resolved or at least contained. That these women should bring their problems (and their less than purely religious motivations) with them—and create new ones—is not surprising: it is these problems that often became explicitly the subject not only of fiction but of law cases as well. There is also no question that Buddhist convents—like Daoist ones—often provided an

option for those women who boasted beauty as well as artistic talents to make use of both to entertain members of the opposite sex, monastic and lay. During periods known for a rich and romantic “courtesan culture”—and the late Ming dynasty was certainly one of these—the line between nuns and prostitutes could be very tenuous indeed. The Luminous Cause Convent (Mingyin an) in Hangzhou, for example, was one of the largest and most well-known convents in the Jiangnan or Lower Yangzi area. It flourished in the Southern Song period and continued to flourish throughout the late imperial period. In the Southern Song, however, it had the reputation for being a *nizhan* (nun station), where monks, literati, and officials would regularly call upon the youngest and most beautiful of the resident nuns for entertainment.⁴ And it is in the Ming-Qing period that we see the emergence of the term *huachan* (flower-Chan), used in reference to nuns who entertained male visitors: among the most sought-after of these were the Wu-Yue *nüsen*g (female monks of Wu-Yue), that is, the nuns of Suzhou, Songjiang, Changzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou.⁵ In fact, one Chinese scholar, in a recent article (the translated title of which—“An Analysis of the Secular Mind-set of the Nuns of Pre-modern China”—gives a good idea of the author’s perspective) claims that it was in the Ming-Qing period that “the transformation of nuns into prostitutes reached its zenith.”⁶

Although these sorts of establishments certainly existed in actuality, in the profoundly anticlerical world of late imperial vernacular literature there were very few nuns (and, to be fair, monks as well) who were not dissolute, and very few convents that were not actually brothels in disguise. Endless examples could be cited as evidence for this, but a few should suffice. The first is a story by the famous late-Ming author Ling Mengchu (1580–1644). This particular tale—entitled “Adding Wine to Wine, Old Nun Zhao Leads a Beauty Astray; With Trick after Trick, Scholar Jin Avenges a Grievance”—takes place in a convent where Abbess Zhao serves as an unscrupulous and greedy go-between in the seduction of a married woman. The first two lines of the poem concisely summarize the dominant motif of this and other such stories: “When it comes to sex, monastics are like hungry ghosts; nor have those bedecked as nuns ever been any better.”⁷ Nor is it only in vernacular fiction that we find such perfidious nuns. If the following poem is any indication of his thoughts on the matter, the noted scholar, lyric poet, and bibliophile Zhu Yizun (1629–1709)—whom we will meet again later—seems to have been convinced that the entire history of nuns in China was one of dissolute licentiousness.

In the Jin dynasty, nuns first appeared on the scene;
By the Liang they’d become irredeemably worldly.

With ease they get involved in monastic dalliances,
 Always putting on a show of being coy and docile.
 Once they enter the gates of a wealthy household,
 Words meant for inside only are carried out the door.
 Arm in arm, they wander together over lake and hill,
 Piling up the gold coins to build temples and stupas.
 Their nunneries proliferate over a hundred districts;
 Even the official bureau cannot keep them in check!
 Spreading licentiousness in their monastic quarters,
 They fill their bellies with the best monastic cuisine.
 In this way, they sully people's customary ways;
 How will an end be put to all of their mischief?
 For women there is that which is women's work,
 The essence of which is sericulture and weaving.
 How is it then, in their monastic patchwork robes,
 That they sally forth from their Jetavana gardens?⁸

In this poem, Zhu Yizun makes use of a number of special religious terms, the associations of which are not easily conveyed in translation. What I have translated as “monastic quarters,” for example, in the original Chinese is *qingdou fang* (green-bean quarters), a reference to simple and austere monastic cells. By the same token, the term translated as “the best monastic cuisine” in the original is *xiangji fan* (accumulated-fragrance food), which in chapter 10 of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* refers to a special food that “is like the medicine called ‘delicious,’ which . . . is not digested until all the poisons of the passions have been eliminated.” And the Jetavana garden, a reference to the first Buddhist monastery in India and a term commonly used to refer to monasteries in general, when combined with the word *sotuo*, which I have translated here as “sally,” evokes more a pleasure garden than a center of monastic discipline.

Zhu Yizun's deliberate use of these terms suggests an intentional parody, of a sort that Andrea Goldman, rightly I believe, ascribes to “the late Ming literati preoccupation with unveiling duplicity . . . than it does with an outright attack on Buddhism.”⁹ Goldman also points out that not all Ming-Qing depictions of nuns were as vicious. In her excellent study of the various versions of the story and operatic piece entitled *Longing for the Secular Life (Sifan)*, she notes that the portrayal of the nun Zhao Sekong “is quite sympathetic.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, the character is a young and beautiful nun who has been placed unwillingly in the convent by pious parents, and as such the religious life represents a site of physical and emotional incarceration rather than of liberation.

The important point is not that these stories, whether from late impe-

rial China or medieval Europe, are all false or even purely fictional, but rather that they are one-sided. In the case of Catholic nuns, McNamara writes:

Protestants prided themselves on “rescuing” women condemned to languish without husbands, and modern historians have habitually ignored the clear testimony of the women who resisted their assaults. Enlightenment fantasies of the perverted sex to which innocent virgins were subjected behind convent walls are still published, but not the rebuttals of women who went to the guillotine rather than give up their cloisters. . . . Even today, the true or fictional accounts of renegade nuns readily gain a popular market. The accounts of women who founded new communities or flourished in old ones are too often left to private presses with limited circulation.¹¹

The aim of this study of seventeenth-century Chan Buddhist nuns is not to show that all Buddhist nuns were actually spiritually transcendent and physically virtuous and all male accounts a matter of fiction and fantasy if not self-righteous slander. Neither is this book about the denizens of the world of flower-Chan. Rather, it about a group of women Chan masters who appear to have entered the religious life not out of compulsion but out of choice, although in many cases they did so only after losing a husband. Moreover, although many of them also engaged in the writing of poetry and were visited by male literati and officials, their primary objectives appear to have been not to entertain but to enlighten. Most important, all of these nuns left written records, including sermons, poems, letters, and, in some cases, autobiographical accounts, that provide the basis for, if not a detailed historical study, at least a series of portraits or representations that more fully reflect how these women themselves preferred to have been remembered. In other words, the purpose of this book is to redress the one-sidedness of the popular perception of nuns in premodern Chinese culture by presenting the far more multidimensional perspective reflected in the collected discourse records (*yulu*) of a group of seventeenth-century women Chan masters. Although originally circulated independently, all of these records were fortunately preserved in a privately printed edition of Buddhist scriptures and other texts known as the Jiaxing canon. For our purposes, these discourse record collections can be said to be equivalent to today’s “private presses with limited circulation.” McNamara notes that, as such, they may not have been as avidly consumed as materials designed for a more popular market; rather, they offer a different, and certainly far less one-dimensional, picture of the Buddhist nun in late imperial China.

Scholars have long noted that the mid-seventeenth century was a time when, in the words of historian Timothy Brook, “only the extremes were available: devoted involvement (*jingshi*) to the point of self-destruction or complete withdrawal (*chushi*) in the style of the Buddhist hermit-monk.”¹² Many literati who, for one reason or other, did not give up their lives as loyalist martyrs retreated to their home districts, dedicating the remainder of their lives to the care of widowed mothers and orphans and making use of their literary talents to praise and lament the death of family, friends, and the dynasty itself. Others went so far as to actually take the tonsure and become ordained Buddhist monks, a few even rising to the ranks of eminent masters. For although it was by no means immune or indifferent to the political exigencies of the time, it was the Buddhist world that managed best to provide a measure of institutional stability in a world of constant change, as well as a hope of solace, if not transcendence, in a time of failed hopes and ruined ambitions.

Of course, the lives of women were also often dramatically affected. Many wives and mothers were left widowed, frequently in severe financial straits and with children and aged parents and in-laws to support and care for. Others found themselves facing a life without either husband or children, morally reluctant to marry someone else when the man to whom they had been promised suffered an untimely death. Not a few women, as the grim lists of *liefu* (heroic women) in the regional gazetteers from this period attest, chose to commit suicide rather than face a future both alone and under an alien regime. As Wai-ye Li points out, during the chaos and turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition period, “the favored literary topos is the heroic woman whose courage, valor, or victimhood adds dignity and pathos to the cataclysmic turmoil of the mid-seventeenth century.”¹³

Some elite women, especially if left widowed or without children, could, like their male counterparts, also choose to enter a convent or hermitage, with far less social opprobrium than before. Some women simply retreated to a room in the family compound or to a specially built family cloister to devote themselves to religious pursuits; others took more active roles. An example of the former is Xia Shuji (*zi* Longying).¹⁴ She was the daughter of the loyalist martyr Xia Yunyi (1596–1645) and the sister of Xia Wanchun (1631–1647), a brilliant poet who died at the hands of the Qing troops two years after his father. Her husband, Hou Xun (nephew of Hou Dongceng, 1591–1645), had led a failed campaign of resistance in his native district of Jiading but was captured by Qing troops, who promptly decapitated him and hung his head on the city wall.¹⁵ Xia Shuji became a recluse—together with her sister-in-law Yao Guiyu, the daughter of Minister of Culture Yao Ximeng and the widow of the loyalist

martyr Hou Yan (1560–1636)—and took the religious name of Shengyin; Yao Guiyu became Zaisheng.¹⁶ Neither of these two women was formally ordained; in fact, there seems to be some confusion in the sources as to whether they were Buddhist or Daoist nuns. The important thing is, however, that their life of seclusion and renunciation represented an active response to the political and social turmoil of the times and paralleled that made by their counterparts among the male literati. In fact, after the fall of the Ming, Hou Jing, a son of the martyr Hou Dongceng and related by marriage to both Xia Shuji and Yao Guiyu, himself took the tonsure at the Lingyin si (Soul's Retreat Monastery) in Hangzhou.

A more active turn to the religious life as a response to the political turmoil of the time is exemplified by the younger sister of Tianran Aozheng (1608–1685), a Caodong Chan master and Ming loyalist from Guangdong.¹⁷ Tianran Aozheng began as a Confucian degree-holder but, after being introduced to Buddhist teachings, left home to become a monk. Before long, due in no small part to the turmoil of the times, his parents, his wife, and his siblings also decided to take the tonsure. Of these, his younger sister, who took the religious name of Jinzai Laiji, had from an early age been known for both her strength of character and her precocious intelligence. She took the tonsure in 1647, around the time she was expected to marry. She and her mother visited with several eminent Caodong masters of the day, and Jinzai Laiji herself soon gained a reputation for her combined practice of Chan (meditation) and Vinaya (discipline) practice. She also devoted herself to building a convent for women, which, after more than ten years of arduous fund-raising (the “piling up of gold coins” referred to so sarcastically by Zhu Yizun) and strenuous effort, was finally completed in 1697. It soon became one of the largest convents of the time and an important refuge for women who had become dislocated during the turmoil of the late Ming and early Qing. After Jinzai Laiji's death, the convent continued to be run by successive generations of her students, and it remains active to this very day.

Both of these examples illustrate an important point: during this period of social and political dislocation, leaving home to enter the religious life became an acceptable, and even honorable, option for educated men and women from the gentry class. Indeed, it was a decision that, while perhaps not quite as admirable as actually giving up one's life for the loyalist cause, was still seen as an expression of heroic resolve. And, most important, definitions of heroism became, by necessity, jolted from their traditional gender categories as men and women alike were forced by the times into situations and circumstances that often required drastic responses. For women in particular, as Wai-yee Li notes, the des-

ignation of *nü yimin* (female remnant subject) “placed women beyond gender-specific virtues.”¹⁸

In 1658 we find the scholar-official and Ming loyalist Gao Yiyong (*zi* Zixiu, *jinshi* 1613)¹⁹ musing that, in his experience, it had been mostly “heroic and valiant men with steely-fierce characters” who were able to walk the path of enlightenment successfully and thus become models of religious achievement. Women, however, associated primarily with “fragrant inner chambers and embroidered fans, and being for the most part fragile and docile,” had been set up as models, not of fierce determination, but rather of “great gentleness”:

If one looks for [women] who have taken refuge in the Dharma groves and transmitted the lamp [of the Dharma] down through the generations, one will not find very many. Could this not be due to the mutual incompatibility of steely-resolve and gentleness? Or is it due to the scarcity of [women] who have been endowed with this gift?²⁰

Gao Yiyong goes on say that although such incompatibility may indeed be true in most cases, he had himself heard of many such religiously heroic women in his own hometown of Jiaxing. In fact, he knew of two such women in his own immediate family.

Since the fall of the previous dynasty, in my district the women’s quarters of prominent families have [produced] many who have sacrificed themselves and saved others. Some were able to abandon illustrious glory and [find] resonance with the Dao; others had different aspirations and donned the dark robes of the Buddhists. . . . Their brilliance vies with those of past and present; as models they illuminate both those who came before and those who will come after!

Jiaxing was located in the heart of Jiangnan, which during the late Ming and early Qing was a center of not only fervent and sustained political loyalty but also—despite and even because of the transitional turmoil—an extraordinarily rich cultural life. In particular, the Jiangnan area was a major site of a flourishing women’s literary culture, which began in the late sixteenth century and continued on into the seventeenth, a period some scholars have termed “the first high tide” of women’s writing in China.²¹

The last decades have seen the emergence of an exciting and increasingly sophisticated and detailed body of scholarship on women writers of the late imperial period, work represented by scholars such as Dorothy Ko, Grace Fong, Kang-i Sun Chang, Ellen Widmer, Susan Mann, Patri-

cia Ebrey, Wilt Idema, and many others. The unprecedented numbers of highly educated Chinese gentry women (as well as, in the late Ming, highly educated courtesans) during this period created a new class of both readers and writers. The growing urbanization, along with the commercialization of printing and publishing, led also to an avid interest in compiling, printing, and publishing both individual collections of poetry by women and anthologies devoted exclusively to women's poetry.²² Although it was largely male publishers and editors who took the lead in this endeavor, in 1667 we see the publication, to great acclaim, of an anthology entitled *Classic Poetry by Famous Women* (*Mingyuan shiwei*), a collection of approximately fifteen hundred poems by over a thousand women compiled, edited, and annotated by the noted woman writer and Ming loyalist Wang Duanshu (b. 1621).

As Dorothy Ko has persuasively argued in her pathbreaking book, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, an important dimension of women's increased literacy and publication was the formation of social and literary networks among women, sometimes within a single extended family, sometimes among different families. In other words, these educated women began to do what their male counterparts had long done: participate in literary coteries and "poetry clubs" through which they were able to engage in intellectual discussions, exchange poems, and even take excursions together to nearby gardens or temples. Clearly, this phenomenon of widespread female literacy is extremely relevant to our study of seventeenth-century nuns, all of whom were highly educated and many of whom had acquired reputations for their literary and other artistic talents even before entering the religious life. For these nuns, entering the convent did not mean cutting all their ties with other elite men and women. In fact, as we shall see, during this period in particular the convent became for elite laywomen what the monastery had always been for male literati: a place they could go not only for religious sustenance and spiritual comfort but for intellectual and aesthetic inspiration as well. It also meant that poetry writing continued to be a primary form of expression for these Buddhist nuns, more often than not used for religious instruction and elucidation, but also composed with an understanding of the traditional conventions, demands, and subtle nuances of literary expression. In fact, it would appear that their intellectual and literary talents and inclinations were largely responsible for attracting these women to Chan Buddhism, with its (theoretically) playful and (ritualistically) iconoclastic and paradoxical use of language to help people overcome their attachment to language, rather than some of the more purely devotional forms of Pure Land practice. It is in Chan Buddhism as well that we find the most ubiquitous expression of the need for heroic determination as opposed

to merely pious devotion—in part because the goal was not rebirth in the Pure Land in another life (and, in the case of women, in a male body) but rather enlightenment in this very life and in this very body (which, in the case of women, meant the female body that in so many Buddhist texts was equated with impurity).

This brings us to a third major factor behind the emergence of the women Chan masters: the vigorous revival or, as Jiang Wu calls it, the “reinvention” of Chan Buddhism. The revival began early in the century and continued for several generations until it finally lost momentum at the beginning of the eighteenth century.²³

The prospects had seemed good for Buddhism when the first Ming emperor, who had himself spent some time as a Buddhist monk, ascended the throne. Although astute enough to realize the importance of exercising a firm control over its institutions, he was in general favorably disposed toward its activities: an edition of the Buddhist canon was reprinted on his command and distributed to many of the larger monasteries. Buddhism continued to flourish under subsequent emperors as well, and the numbers of temples, monasteries, and clergy grew rapidly. During the sixteenth century, however, with the ascent of the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566) to the throne, Buddhism went into eclipse. Although the emperor appears to have been completely obsessed with his desire to obtain Daoist immortality for himself, a number of dedicated Confucian officials took advantage of their emperor’s undisguised anti-Buddhist feelings to impose what were often quite draconian measures on the many Buddhist establishments that dotted the Chinese physical and social landscape. The ubiquitous presence of convents particularly offended the orthodox Confucian sensibilities of many of these men. One of the most egregious examples of this is the official Huo Tao, who in 1536 took it as his personal mission to clean his home city of Nanjing of its nuns and nunneries. A year later he announced: “Now all of the nuns fifty and below have been returned to their natal families; their pernicious influence has been mitigated, and there are no longer any cloisters or temples into which people’s wives and daughters can secretly repair.”²⁴

The death of the Jiajing emperor put a halt to this persecution, and after a hiatus of nearly a century, Buddhism began to flourish again in the mid-sixteenth century. The so-called wild Chan (*kuang Chan*) of the late Ming, associated primarily with iconoclastic figures such as Li Zhi (1527–1602), advocated the spiritual (and artistic) values of intuitionism and spontaneity. Although highly influenced by Chan notions of sudden enlightenment, this movement was not primarily a religious one. Promoted largely by the literati, and in particular the immediate disciples of Wang Yangming (1472–1529), the members of the so-called Taizhou

school of Confucianism, it was marked by an outpouring of often marvelous poetry. However, no major Chan monasteries and few eminent Chan masters were associated with *kuang Chan*. In fact, the most well-known Buddhist teachers of the period, monks such as Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1612), Zibo Zhenke (1543–1603), and Hanshan Deqing (1546–1623), derived much of their religious authority from opposing the extreme antinomianism (which many equated with moral corruption) that they associated with the Chan school. That is, although they certainly did teach meditation, they placed equal, if not greater, emphasis on devotional practices, scriptural study, meritorious works, and moral discipline. They also, to a large extent, advocated a more traditional role for religious women: preferably the pious performance of devotional practices within the privacy of the home's inner quarters or, in special cases, within the cloistered confines of a convent.²⁵

Just as active during this time, although far less well known today, was Chan master Miyun Yuanwu (1566–1642). Together with his twelve Dharma successors, he embarked on an energetic attempt to revive what he called the “orthodoxy of the Linji school” (*Linji zhengzong*) and to recover what he considered to be the true spirit of the great Tang master Linji Yixuan (d. 866). This endeavor involved primarily two strategies. The first was a renewed emphasis on nonverbal teaching methods, in particular the “blows and shouts” (*banghe*) that were said to have been used, with apparently extraordinary results, by Linji and his immediate disciples. It was these “blows and shouts,” he felt, that represented the very heart of the method of Linji himself. Huang Duanbo (?–1645), a well-known Ming loyalist and a follower of Miyun Yuanwu, who wrote a preface to his teacher's collection of discourse records, notes admiringly: “He makes use of blows and shouts alternatively, leaving students without the opportunity of opening their mouths. Everyone follows after him, and regards him as Master Linji come again.”²⁶ Indeed Miyun Yuanwu's Chan Buddhist revival found many adherents among the literati, who took great intellectual pleasure, if not spiritual inspiration, from the dramatic performance of “blows and shouts” and the tantalizing intellectual challenge of the encounter dialogues. Others, however, were less impressed. The famous scholar-poet and Buddhist layman Qian Qianyi (1582–1664), who considered himself primarily a follower of Yunqi Zhuhong, regarded all of this shouting and hitting as little more than the theatrical antics of little boys:

The Chan of today is not Chan. . . . If a smile is called for, then just smile; if wall-gazing is what is required, then just gaze at the wall; if beating and shouting are necessary, then just shout and beat. . . . Today [Chan masters]

draw analogies freely and lecture to just anybody. The demonstration in the Dharma hall can be compared to actors ascending the stage; the paying of homage and the bestowal of certification of enlightenment are like performances enacted by little boys. They boast to each other about the number of followers they have, the extent of their fame, and the wealth of their profits and patronage.²⁷

Another primary characteristic of Miyun Yuanwu's revival was a renewed emphasis on the vital importance of official Dharma transmission between an authentic, living Chan master and his disciple, between spiritual father and son. This emphasis—one could say obsession—with verifying, claiming, and establishing lines of legitimate Dharma transmission, as Jiang Wu's magisterial study persuasively demonstrates, often resulted in the spilling of an extraordinary amount of passionate and polemical ink, both among Miyun Yuanwu's own students and between different schools of Buddhism. This period also witnessed the establishment of the Dharma-transmission monastery (*chuanfa conglin*), a new kind of Chan institution whose abbots were selected on the basis of their membership in certain Dharma transmission lineages. One of the consequences of this concern for reviving and strengthening what was believed to be the authentic orthodox Linji lineage was a veritable explosion of Dharma transmissions. Miyun Yuanwu's twelve Dharma heirs legitimated no fewer than 495 of their own Dharma successors, and by the third generation, there were 1,168 Dharma heirs in Miyun Yuanwu's line. And, most important, a small but significant number of these Dharma heirs were women. In fact, Gao Yiyong's relative, and the nun for whom he wrote a preface, was one of these female Chan masters. Thanks to a particular historical confluence of causes and conditions, these women were not only able but expected to travel and study with eminent Chan masters and then take on disciples of their own, as well as to engage in active fund-raising and convent building, to deliver public religious discourses, and especially to have these discourses, as well as other writings, compiled, printed, and circulated. As recognized (though sometimes hotly disputed) members of the Linji lineage, they were also able to transcend the purely local. They took their place, if only temporarily, in a religious context that was said to reach back to Linji and other great Tang masters and was part of a larger religious and textual community extending over much of seventeenth-century China.

As this study will show, a significant number of these women took their roles as Chan masters very seriously, mastering the classical Chan textual tradition and drawing with considerably authority and ease on this tradition for their own formal and informal Dharma talks, as well as

for their letters, poems, words of instruction, and other writings. These women Chan masters, all of whom served as abbesses of at least one or more convents, devoted unstinting time, effort, and energy to fund-raising, to building and expanding their respective convents, and to meeting the various needs—whether for food, ritual services, or spiritual counsel—not only of their own monastic communities but of lay and monastic visitors as well. They also took very seriously their duty to maintain, strengthen, and ultimately pass on both convent and lineage to qualified women successors. And finally, they labored, with the help of their disciples and lay supporters, to assure that their teachings and contributions would be remembered by future generations, by taking full advantage of the Chan master's prerogative to have his or her words preserved in collections of discourse records.—whether written, recorded, or, as was often the case, a combination of the two.

This brings us back to a point made earlier about the extraordinary expansion of printing and publication that characterized the late Ming and early Qing periods in particular. As we have seen, one of the most significant new categories of publication was women's writings, whether as privately published collections designed largely for family consumption or as large, commercially marketed anthologies. Another important category of publications was that of Chan texts, including genealogical histories, or "histories of the transmission of the flame [the Dharma]" (*chuan-deng lu*), as well as hundreds of discourse record collections. Among the latter were not only reprints of the discourse records of the great masters of the Tang and Song dynasties but also compilations of new ones by seventeenth-century Chan masters. A large selection of these collections, both old and new, came to be included in a privately printed edition of the (expanded) Buddhist canon known as the *Jiaxing dazang jing*. The carving of the blocks for this collection began in 1579 on Mount Wutai, at the instigation of Master Zibo Zhenke. After his death in 1603, the work was transferred to the Jiangnan area, and it was not until 1677 that the first complete edition was printed at a monastery on Mount Jing near Hangzhou. The primary distribution center for this new collection was the Śūramgama Monastery (Lengyan si) in nearby Jiaxing, which is why it is often referred to as the Jiaxing canon. Additions continued to be made to this collection up until 1719. The Jiaxing canon contains more than five hundred titles not included in any previous editions, public or private, of the Buddhist canon. Some of these additions were expanded or previously unpublished texts from earlier periods, but the majority were texts associated with seventeenth-century Chan Buddhist masters. Because it contains texts found nowhere else, the Chinese scholar Lan Jifu goes so far as equate the significance of the Jiaxing canon for the

study of seventeenth-century Chan to that of the more famous discoveries at Dunhuang.²⁸

It is noteworthy, although not particularly novel, that a significant number of nuns and laywomen were involved in sponsoring the carving and printing of the discourse record collections of male Chan masters included in the Jiaxing canon; in some cases, in fact, the primary sponsors were women rather than men. Exactly one-half of the thirty fascicles of discourse records of Linji Chan master Baichi Xingyuan (1611–1662), for example, were sponsored by Buddhist nuns, usually single-handedly, sometimes with the help of a laywoman. And the printing of the entire fourteen-fascicle discourse record collection of Linji Chan master Feiyin Tongrong (1593–1661), Baichi Xingyuan’s teacher and one of Miyun Yuanwu’s most well-known Dharma successors, was sponsored primarily by his female Dharma heir, the nun Fajin Xinghao, with the help of a laywoman, Madame Cheng. What is novel, however, and extremely noteworthy is the inclusion of seven discourse record collections, each collection from one to five fascicles in length and ascribed to a different female Chan master of the Linji lineage. There are also two additional collections of writings—a compilation of poems and other writings published by one of the seven nuns after the compilation of her discourse records, and a collaborative collection of religious verses composed by two of the other nuns.

This is not to say that these are the first such writing nuns in Chinese history. In fact, from the very beginning of female monasticism in China there have been nuns known for their intellectual acumen, preaching skills, and literary talents.²⁹ Nor are they the first women Chan masters. In the Song dynasty, as Miriam Levering describes it,

women for the first time are able to be fully imagined as teachers and lineage members, serving as abbesses, preaching sermons, and teaching by entering into dialogues and Dharma combat. . . . They behave ceremonially as men teachers do, ascending the Hall, as Buddhas to teach. . . . They leave the same marks on the world as men do: in the case of several of the women . . . we are told that records of their sayings, activities and poems circulated in the world.³⁰

The person credited with doing the most to legitimize women’s participation in the “public” sphere of Chan religious life was Linji Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), whose reprinted discourse records, not incidentally, were particularly popular in the seventeenth century. Dahui Zonggao was acknowledged as one of the greatest Buddhist figures of his day and credited with the perfection of the cultivation technique known

as *kanhua Chan* (investigation of the critical phrase). According to Levering, the religious effectiveness of this technique was validated primarily by Dahui Zonggao's women disciples, in particular the three women who were to receive his official Dharma transmission: the laywoman Lady Qinguo and two women who left married life to become nuns and Chan Buddhist masters, Miaodao and Miaozong.³¹

Although Dahui Zonggao's women disciples were the first to be officially acknowledged as Dharma successors (which, as we shall see, was of considerable symbolic and practical significance to seventeenth-century women), they were not the first "eminent nuns" in the Chan tradition. The unofficial "female lineage," revived if not actually created in the seventeenth century, goes back to Zongchi, who tradition (and mostly likely legend) counts among the four senior disciples of Bodhidharma. Although she is said to have attained only the "flesh" of his teaching—her fellow student, the monk Huike was said to have attained the marrow and was thus deemed worthy of inheriting the title "patriarch of Chan Buddhism"—she did acquire an informal role as "matriarch" over the centuries. (In tracing the Chan lineage to its Indian origins, Mahakashyapa is often referred to as the first person to have received the "special" wordless Dharma transmission from the Buddha, and thus the first Indian patriarch of Chan. The Buddha's aunt and step-mother, Mahaprajapati, traditionally credited with having persuaded him—with the intervention of his male disciple Ananda—to agree to the formation of a female sangha, regarded as the first in a parallel female Chan Buddhist lineage.)

From Zongchi, there is a big leap to Chan Buddhist women of the Tang dynasty—or more accurately, to the stories of Tang-dynasty Chan practitioners recorded in various texts compiled during the Song and early Yuan. Many of these women are nameless and advanced in years—such as the old woman of Taishan who manages to confound the disciples of Linji and, apparently, even Linji himself. Another noteworthy female figure is Liu Tiemo, or Iron-Grinder Liu. She was a disciple of the famous Chan master Guishan Lingyou (771–853), whose Chan practice was described as "precipitously awesome and dangerous" and who features in case 60 of the *Blue Cliff Record (Biyan lu)*, a collection of a hundred Chan stories published in the Song dynasty and also exceedingly popular during the seventeenth century.

Although there are numerous references to wise old women in Buddhist texts claiming to be records of Tang Chan history (most of which are Song-dynasty creations), one Tang-dynasty nun—Moshan Liaoran—is actually given a record of her own in the important *Jingde chuandeng lu* (Transmission of the Lamp of the Jingde Period), one of the first collections of biographical accounts of Chan-lineage monks, compiled in

1004.³² The famous story of her Dharma encounter with the querulous and skeptical monk Guanxi Zhixian (d. 895) is referred to again and again, often as evidence of women's religious potential, in the discourse records of both male and female Chan masters of the seventeenth century. Indeed, one of the highest compliments that most male Chan masters could think to pay a Chan nun was either to refer to her as a reincarnation of Moshan or, at the very least, to assure her that she was worthy of carrying on the Moshan lineage. In this story, Guanxi Zhixian asks Moshan, whose name means "Summit Mountain," what this summit is like, to which Moshan Liaoran replies that it "does not reveal its peak." The monk persists, asking who the owner of Summit Mountain is, to which Moshan Liaoran replies, "Its appearance is not male or female." At this point, Guanxi Zhixian changes direction and asks, "Why doesn't it transform itself?" Moshan Liaoran's response is immediate: "It is not a god and it is not ghost, What should it transform itself into?" Her reply echoes that of the nameless nun who was a disciple of Linji Yixuan's and, when challenged by the monk Tankong to manifest at least one transformation, retorted, "I am not a wild fox spirit. What should I change into?" The point, of course, was that "maleness" and "femaleness" are not essential attributes—indeed Buddhism denies any such unchanging essence or "own-being." In the end, Guanxi Zhixian has the grace and the wisdom to recognize Moshan Liaoran's superior wisdom and even goes so far as to work as her gardener for three years.

There were also a fair number of eminent Chan nuns in the years following the Song dynasty. In the early Yuan, the eminent Linji Chan master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238–1295), whose discourse records were also an exceedingly popular reprint in the seventeenth century, followed Dahui Zonggao's practice of naming female Dharma successors. One of them was Pugui Wuwei, the orphaned daughter of an official who died while on a government mission to Japan. She eventually acquired a reputation for the eloquence of her Dharma talks, as well as her *songgu*, or poetic eulogies on the ancient precedents, or cases, of the great Chan masters. We are told that these eulogies were so beautifully written that they were often memorized and recited. She died in 1322 and was said to have left behind five-colored relics (*sarira*), the traditional sign of extraordinary spiritual accomplishment.³³ Another of Gaofeng Yuanmiao's female Dharma heirs was Wenjian Guxin, who was also known for her eloquent and persuasive preaching. She established a large convent in her hometown, and later was invited to the capital in Beijing, where she became the abbess of two major convents. She also died in 1322.³⁴

Many of these earlier women were known for their impressive command, not only of Buddhist literature, but also of the Confucian classics

and Daoist texts. As Chan masters, several of them also left collections of discourse records, which may well have been printed and circulated during their lifetimes. The Song-dynasty nun Miaozong (1095–1170) was particularly highly regarded for her literary and poetic talent. Although her discourse record collection is no longer extant in its entirety, forty of her poetic eulogies on ancient cases remain and, as we shall see, were the source of both spiritual and literary inspiration for our seventeenth-century Buddhist nuns. In fact, Miaozong's name will appear over and over again in our story of seventeenth-century women Chan masters, who as practitioners are exhorted to follow her example and as realized Chan masters are often praised as being her equal, if not her actual reincarnation. The seventeenth-century Linji Chan master Baichi Xingyuan, for example, in his instructions to the nun Zhixue, recounts the story of Miaozong's enlightenment upon overhearing an exchange between Dahui and a male disciple. Baichi Xingyuan then remarks, "If you rely on Miaozong as an exemplary model, then when you encounter others, you will not have to sheathe your talons and claws!"³⁵

The problem is, of course, that for most of these earlier nuns, very little, if any, of their own writings still exist. For others, we have a handful of poems and a few sermons. But for none of them do we have any extant discourse record collections, such as the one we are told was left by Miaozong. Even the handful of seventeenth-century Chan nuns for whom we do have extant discourse records represents a fraction of the actual number of such that may have been in circulation at the time. I have so far found references to nearly two dozen discourse record collections by seventeenth-century women Chan masters, all of which are said to have "circulated in the world" (*xingshi*). In other words, the women who are the subject of this study, while certainly constituting a minority within the larger world of seventeenth-century Chan Buddhism, were not necessarily as marginal or even as exceptional as one might presume.