Introduction

Why Study Nuns?

In recent years there has been a general surge of interest in Taiwanese Buddhism. Books on Ciji (Compassionate Relief) (Huang 2009), Foguang (Buddha Light) (Chandler 2004), the history of Taiwanese Buddhism (Jones 1999), and Buddhism in Taiwanese society (Laliberté 2004, Madsen 2007) are representative. Scholars have also been impressed by the quality and size of nuns’ orders: Taiwanese nuns today are highly educated and greatly outnumber monks, characteristics unprecedented in the history of Chinese Buddhism. I am interested in knowing how and why does a young woman become attracted to Buddhism and decide to become a nun? After joining the sangha, what kind of training does she receive at seminary? What kind of work does she do upon graduation? And finally, what sorts of problems and setbacks does she experience? By examining what may seem quotidian details of training and service, we can get a sense of the bigger picture of Buddhism in Taiwanese society. This book therefore does not focus on charismatic leaders or complex institutions; it is instead a case study that presents one order of nuns to reflect on the realities of contemporary nuns generally in Taiwan.

My research on contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist nuns grew out of my earlier work on the cult of Guanyin (Yü 2001); that project provided the opportunity for me to work with and study the nuns. Guanyin is widely worshiped in Taiwan, and the many temples dedicated to her are located across the island. In central and southern Taiwan, such temples are called “grottoes” (yan in Mandarin and giama in Taiwanese). The main icon in these temples is always Guanyin, who is accompanied by Mazu, Nuoza, and other deities. Villagers come to seek guidance by casting lots and make offerings by burning spirit money. As Taiwanese Buddhism began to prosper in the 1970s, many yan were either transformed or incorporated into Buddhist temples. In such complexes the original Guanyin temple in the front tends to be full of noisy pilgrims and worshipers while the back hall remains quiet and reserved for Buddhist practices. It was during my study of this kind of temple in 1995 that I first became acquainted with the Incense Light Bhikṣūnī Sangha. This particular community of nuns is based in a temple known originally as Jade Mountain Grotto (Yushan Yan), a religious center for people in the thirteen villages scattered in the surrounding hills outside Chiayi, a city in central Taiwan.
THE HISTORICAL PICTURE

The history of Buddhist nuns in China is a unique one. Unlike nuns in Tibet and Southeast Asian Buddhist countries, Chinese nuns boast a lineage unbroken since the fifth century. Those in Taiwan thus inherit a tradition of some sixteen hundred years. Due to the scarcity of sources and the lack of interest of past scholars, who concentrated primarily on monks, we still do not know much about nuns or the religious lives of Buddhist women in China. It is impossible to reconstruct a continuous history for Chinese nuns, but it will be helpful to briefly review what we can excavate from available records. One can find accounts about and references to nuns in various sources, such as local and temple gazetteers, the voluminous Chan lamp records, collected essays by literati, epigraphs and tomb inscriptions, and poems by nuns themselves. But the most important are the collections of nuns’ biographies. Biographies of monks have been assiduously collected by generations of monk-scholars. Huijiao (497–554) compiled the first lives of 257 monks in the Biographies of Eminent Monks (Gaoseng zhuan). Daoxuan (596–667) and Zanning (919–1001) wrote two sequels, the Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks (Xu gaoseng zhuan) and the Song Biographies of Eminent Monks (Song gaoseng zhuan); these works cover monks who had lived since Huijiao’s time and collected 485 and more than 500 biographies, respectively. Compared to the riches of these sources, only two modest collections of nuns’ lives exist. The first, The Lives of Nuns (Biqiuni zhuan), written by the monk Baochang in or about 516 CE, begins with Zhu Jingjian, who lived around 292–361. Not until the twentieth century was a sequel written, by another monk, Zhenhua (1908–1947), who compiled the Continued Lives of Nuns (Xubiqiuni zhuan). Zhenhua, the abbot of the Jade Buddha Monastery in Shanghai, was a favorite disciple of Master Taixu (1890–1947), a famous reformer of modern Buddhism. Zhenhua compiled the biographies of another two hundred nuns who lived from the sixth century to the Republican period. These stories allow us to see the modern faces of the Incense Light nuns in historical perspective.

Buddhist tradition credits the founding of the original bhikṣūṇī sangha (order of nuns) to Mahāprajāpati, maternal aunt and foster mother of the Buddha. According to conventional accounts, as a result of her three repeated requests and Ānanda’s intercession, the Buddha agreed to allow women into the sangha, despite initial reluctance. However, the Buddha did not grant this permission without reservation; he predicted that the True Dharma would last only five hundred instead of a thousand years because of the admission of women. More-
over, he imposed the so-called Eight Rules of Respect (Skt. *Garudharma*; Ch. *bajing fa*) on the nuns, subordinating them institutionally to the monks (Heirman 1997, 34–43).

From the beginning of Buddhism the sangha has included four types of believers: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. The order of nuns, however, was never introduced into Tibet. Although the bhikṣūṇī sangha once existed in India and other Buddhist countries, with the disappearance of Buddhism in India in the thirteenth century, the order of nuns also disappeared. It disappeared even earlier in Sri Lanka, around the end of the tenth century. According to the Vinaya precepts of monastic rule, a woman, unlike a man, must receive dual ordination, first from ten fully ordained nuns and then from ten fully ordained monks. Because the bhikṣūṇī sangha ceased to exist in Theravāda Buddhism, no woman has been able to formally become a nun in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, India, Sri Lanka or Tibet.

The situation of nuns in China, in contrast, has been much better. Although the ordination of women proved problematic at the very beginning, once the order was established, Chinese nuns were incorporated into the regular monastic community and have been receiving the dual ordination since 434 (Huimin 1998, 6–8; Heirman 2002, 295). Because of their close cultural relationship with China, nuns in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam enjoy the same distinction (Robinson and Johnson 1997, 77).

A recent study of the *The Lives of Nuns* by Liu Yao explains why Baochang was the only monk to record an account of nuns prior to the twentieth century. Baochang was a prolific writer, and Liu lists eighteen works in more than 840 scrolls that he composed either alone or as part of a team (Liu 2009, 15). Unfortunately, aside from *The Lives of Nuns*, most of these are no longer extant. Why did Baochang write this work? Liu offers four reasons: First, although Buddhism flourished under the patronage of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549), the social status of monks and nuns declined. Compared to the treatment nuns received under the Jin (265–420), Song (420–477), and Qi (477–502), they fared less well under the Liang. Second, the practice of compiling histories flourished during this period and among the works produced, the genre of monks’ biographies saw the most growth. Third, writing biographies of exemplary women such as the *Lie nü zhuan* had become established long before Baochang’s era, and these paved the way for similar works. Finally, Baochang had both the literary ability and a desire to reform the nuns’ community. Liu provides statistics on the number of temples and the size of the sangha during the four Southern Dynasties (Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen, [557–589]) to show the strength of
Buddhism in the Liang (Liu 2009, 74–75). Because Emperor Wu was a devotee of Buddhism, under his reign there were none of the disputes among Buddhism and Confucianism and Daoism that had troubled other periods. Still none of the four Liang rulers singled out any nun for patronage, although Emperor Wu frequently treated monks with respect (Liu 2009, 85). Liu suggests two reasons why nuns were neglected. The first is that Emperor Wu wanted to promote the study of philosophical Buddhism. Monks who specialized in the study of the Nirvāṇa, Satyasiddhi (Chengshi, Establishment of Truth), the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, and the Three Treatises enjoyed imperial favor. Few nuns were proficient in these texts due to their lack of education, and furthermore, most nuns were primarily interested in personal cultivation (Liu 2009, 87). Second, the general neglect of monastic discipline among monks and nuns during the Liang lowered the general social status of both.

Baochang was the only monk-scholar in the premodern period who wrote biographies of both monks and nuns, to whom he showed equal respect. According to Liu, this was most unusual. Other notable monk-scholars of the era, Senshuo, Huijiao (497–554), and Daoxuan (596–667), all regarded women to be weak in intelligence and held them in low regard (Liu 2009, 120). Dynastic histories such as Jin shu, Song shu, Nan Qi shu, and Nan shi refer to nuns as ni’ao, niman, and nilao, all meaning “old nuns,” implying infirmity and decline (Liu 2009, 121). Similarly, when Ouyang Xiu compiled the New History of the Tang (Xin Tang shi) he deleted all mentions of nuns from the Old History of the Tang (Tang shi) because of his negative attitude toward them (Liu 2009, 122).

The three collections of monks’ lives follow a similar format; the biographies are grouped under ten distinct categories: translators, exegetes, meditators, elucidators of the Vinaya, defenders of the Dharma, thaumaturges, those who sacrifice themselves, chanters of scripture, benefactors, and those with miscellaneous talents. This organizing principle is somewhat arbitrary, for oftentimes a monk could be classified under more than one category. The Lives of Nuns does not classify its subjects this way. There are two other notable differences between the biographies of monks and nuns. The first concerns the reasons women decided to become nuns: Their motivations were often related to their marital status; they “left home” (the technical term for become a monastic) either after they had become widowed or because they did not want to get married. The second is that no nun is ever identified as a translator, although several are famed for their scholarship and their ability to lecture and chant sutras.

A general profile of the sixty-five women in The Lives of Nuns will give us a sense of their backgrounds. Twenty-six of them came from the north (nota-
bly the major cities of Chang’an and Loyang), and twenty-eight from the south (notably Pengcheng); two came from families who had moved from the north to the south, one from Sichuan, one from Yunnan; and the remaining six were of unknown origin. Ten of the nuns came from the literati-official class on account of their fathers or husbands, who held official positions including governor, undersecretary of provincial forces, magistrate, student at the imperial academy, secretary to the head of subprefectural personnel, military commander of the title Marshal in Charge of Subjugating Barbarians, marquis assistant to the provincial governor, and an unspecified “high-ranking official.” Kathryn Tsai estimates that over 80 percent of these nuns were literate (Tsai 1994, 7) because the author provides a bit of information about the education they received prior to leaving home. Some studied the Confucian classics and literature, others were educated in the Daoist metaphysics known as Dark Learning (xuanxue) or both Buddhist and non-Buddhist writings. For those whose education is not specified, we may assume that they probably were either already literate or taught to be so soon after they entered monastic life, for many of them were said to be able to write commentaries and give lectures on the sutras.

Of the twenty-seven nuns whose ages at leaving home were noted, nine were under the age of ten; two left at age eleven, one at thirteen, three at eighteen, two at nineteen, three at twenty, two at twenty-one, and one each at ages twenty-two, twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and thirty. The oldest, Fasheng (368–439), did not become a nun until the age of seventy. Since a life of celibacy contradicted Confucian family values, which required everyone to get married and produce descendents, this obligation was one of the most formidable obstacles a man or a woman had to overcome to become a monastic. However, since twelve of the nuns left home before the age of thirteen, earlier than the usual marrying age, we can assume that this was not universally a problem. In fact, some parents of the younger nuns were said to be actively supportive of their daughters’ decision not to marry.

What accounts for this phenomenon? According to Chikusa Masaaki, women began to become nuns at younger ages because “by the fifth century the community of nuns was established firmly enough that parents felt comfortable entrusting their children to its care” (2002, 12). Compared to the Eastern Jin (317–420), when two women were recorded to have become nuns at ages twenty-one and twenty-two, the number of women joining monasteries as teenagers increased considerably from the Song (420–477) on (Chikusa 2002, 12). On the other hand, there were seventeen cases of women who clearly refused marriage. Of these, five were women who had been married but when their husband died...
refused to remarry; twelve were women who vowed never to marry. In the latter cases, outright opposition to these refusals was noted only in two. Interestingly, it was the mother and grandmother, respectively, who objected to their daughters’ rejection of marriage. Because the compiler does not say anything about the others, it is of course risky to conclude that women in the fourth to the sixth centuries did not have a hard time defying family expectations. This should caution us against making sweeping generalizations about refusals of marriage and generational conflict (Lee 1994, 55).

The nuns whose lives were described so long ago come across even today as exceptional. Many of them were admired by emperors, nobles, officials, and men of letters. They were patronized by both royal families and local gentry. One nun advised the emperor about the appointment of a new governor, while two were asked to accompany a governor to his new post as advisers. These nuns were clearly regarded with respect and admiration. What qualities constituted their unique sanctity?

Like the lives of saints in Christianity, the accounts of Buddhist monks and nuns are more hagiography than biography. However, as John Kieschnick points out, these stories represent “not only reflections of shared perceptions of the monk, they were also an attempt to shape opinions, to instill a particular set of monastic ideals” (1997, 111). If we want to discover what the faith community considered great in a monk or a nun, this literature is the place to begin. Kieschnick singles out three ideal types that exemplified the monastic ideal: the ascetic, the thaumaturge (worker of miracles), and the scholar. He suggests that it was through the creation of these three that the sangha carried out its “image war” with Daoism and orthodox Confucianism to lay claim to the hearts and minds of the people (1997, 143). These same ideal types are found among the nuns. In addition, filial piety, observation of monastic rules, proficiency in meditation, and devotion to the Buddhist sutras through the practice of marathon chanting were also highly lauded virtues. The introduction of dual ordination and the study of Vinaya texts on monastic rules during this period were topics of great interest to Baochang. By praising nuns who were strict in their observance of monastic rules, Baochang hoped to promote them as models for others to emulate. Many of the nuns featured in the Lives studied the Vinaya. While some became experts in their studies, others were noted for their scrupulous observance of the precepts. They were aware of the dual ordination requirement for nuns, and before this became possible with the arrival of Sri Lankan nuns in 434, it troubled some of them greatly that they could not be ordained properly.

Of the five Vinaya texts that originated with the five Hinayana Buddhist
schools in India, four were translated into Chinese. Those texts were translated and actively studied during the thirty years from 405 to 435 (Li 1989, 127–132). Among the four, the *Shisong lü* (Monastic rules in ten recitations) of the Sarvāstivāda school and the *Sifen lü* (Monastic rules in four divisions) of the Dharmaguptaka school were equally popular in fifth- and sixth-century China. However, ever since Daoxuan (596–667) undertook promoting the *Sifen lü*, this has been the Vinaya followed by the Chinese sangha.

The first featured nun in Baochang’s work, Zhu Jingjian (ca. 292–ca. 361), received only the ten precepts for a novice from the monk Fashi in the period 313–317, together with twenty-four other women. In 357 the foreign monk Tanmoxieduo planned to establish an ordination platform in Loyang on the eighth day of the second month (the date of the Buddha’s entry into nirvana) from which he himself would bestow on Zhu and others the bhikṣuṇi precepts from the order of monks. However, due to the objection of a conservative monk named Daochang, who regarded the proposed ordination as contrary to the Vinaya regulation, it did not go forward. Although Zhu Jingjian was not fully ordained according to the Vinaya rules, she nonetheless transmitted precepts to other women who wanted to become nuns. One of these, An Lingshou, received the precepts from both Jingjian and a famous monk, Fotuteng (231–348). Still, the system of dual ordination was not formally instituted until after the Jin dynasty. Most nuns of that early period received ordination from monks only, although the order of nuns had already been started. It was not until almost eighty years later, during the yuanjia reign period (424–453) of the Song, that dual ordination was established with the consecutive arrivals of Sri Lankan nuns. Eight nuns landed in China in 429 and another eleven arrived in 434, all traveling under the auspices of a Sri Lankan merchant. By 434, the nuns who had come earlier had learned the language, and the requirement that precepts be transmitted by at least ten fully ordained nuns could at last be met and dual ordination carried out. The biographies of several nuns attest to these important historical events. Huiguo (ca. 364–433) and Sengguo (b. 408) took the full ordination from both orders, the former together with five of her disciples, the latter as one of over three hundred female novices.

Although both the *Sifen lü* and the *Shisong lü* were available for study, according to the accounts in the *Lives*, the latter was far more popular in the south. We find a number of nuns who were specialists in this text, which might have been due to its position on dual ordination. Unlike the other Vinaya texts, the *Shisong lü* does not list dual ordination as a prerequisite to assuming a monastic identity. Only after the reordination of nuns was already widely practiced was this stipulation added by the monk Sengju to a handbook for monks who per-
formed rituals according to the *Shisong lü*. This could have been done to bring it into conformity to the *Sifen lü* of the Dharmaguptaka tradition (Li 1989, 13).

Among ascetic practices, the highest was to sacrifice one’s life for the sake of the Dharma. This was done in early medieval times by self-immolation, a practice that Baochang referred to by the terms *zifeng* and *shaoshen*. There was a long tradition of self-immolation performed by Chinese monks, and Baochang included in the *Lives* six nuns who did this, following the example of the Medicine King Bodhisattva in the Lotus Sūtra. Baochang had also authored an early biography of monks, *Lives of Famous Monks* (*Mingseng zhuan*), a work in thirty fascicles containing the biographies of 425 monks. It was compiled in 510, but has not survived in its entirety. The table of contents and some selections were copied by the thirteenth-century Japanese monk Sōshō (1202–1278). It is interesting to note that compared to the six out of sixty-five nuns who immolated themselves in the *Lives*, only nineteen out of the 425 monks did so (Benn 2007, 20–21). It is equally striking that out of the 257 monks profiled in Huijiao’s *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, only eight performed self-immolation. While nuns like the monks were inspired by the deed of the Medicine King, they might have had another motivation. Chikusa Masaaki points out the following passage in the twenty-third chapter of the Lotus Sūtra: by self-immolation a woman would not only be released from her female body, she would also go to the Pure Land straightaway:

If a woman, hearing this Chapter of the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, can accept and keep it, she shall put an end to her female body and shall never again receive one. If after the extinction of the Thus Come One, within the last five hundred years, there is then a woman who, hearing this scriptural canon, practices as preached, at the end of this life she shall straightaway go to the world-sphere Comfortable (*Sukhāvatī*), to the dwelling place of the Buddha Amitāyus, where he is surrounded by a multitude of great bodhisattvas, there to be reborn on a jeweled throne among lotus blossoms, never again to be tormented by anger or folly, never again to be tormented by greed, never again to be tormented by pride, envy, or other defilements. (Hurvitz 1976, 300)

Baochang relates how two nuns, Tanjian and Jingguei, immolated themselves on the night of the eighth day of the second month (the day the Buddha entered nirvana) in 494. There was not much fanfare around this event. After gathering firewood, they mounted their pyres and kindled a fire. They did this
as “an offering to the Three Treasures.” In 501 another nun, Tanyong, immolated herself as “an offering to the Buddha.” In a few cases, Baochang provides more details. For instance, the nun Daocong also offered herself to the Buddha on a full-moon night in 463. She “purified herself in a fire fed by oil. Even though she was engulfed by flames up to her forehead, and her eyes and ears were nearly consumed, her chanting of the scriptures did not falter” (Tsai 1994, 60). The immediate response to such acts of self-sacrifice was invariably shock and wonder from other people, who were said to be inspired to redouble their efforts to seek enlightenment.

Profiles in The Lives of Nuns

Baochang’s account features women who were both talented and highly productive. The scholarly nuns distinguished themselves by giving lectures on scriptures and monastic rules or by writing commentaries on scriptures. The most common sutras were the Lotus, the Vimalakirti, the Nirvana, the Avatamsaka (Flower Garland), and the Smaller Perfection of Wisdom; less common were the Šūrangama Sūtra and various treatises.

At the age of twenty Zhu Daoxin could recite from memory the Lotus Sūtra, the Vimalakirti Sūtra, and other scriptures. She was the first nun to specialize in expounding on the meaning of the scriptures. She was highly skilled in “pure conversation” (qingtan), a style of discourse favored by literati during the Six Dynasties (fourth to the sixth centuries). It was highly philosophical, full of references to Laozi, Zhuangzi and sometimes the Yijing; it was also characterized by witty repartee. Zhu Daoxin was especially good at explaining the Smaller Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra, and students of Buddhism across the entire province regarded her as their teacher and master.

Tanche (422–484) was proficient in both scriptures and monastic rules. Before she became a fully ordained nun, she was already learned in the scriptures and their commentaries. After she received the full precepts for a nun, she made a special study of Vinaya texts. She excelled at exposition—distinguishing fine points, resolving doubts, and probing deeply into hidden meanings. As a result, students flocked to her.

Zhisheng (427–492) had a remarkable memory. After listening to the Nirvanā Sūtra only once, she had it memorized. Later, when she was studying books on monastic discipline, she mastered them without having to be taught twice. She wrote several tens of scrolls of commentaries in which both her writing style and her interpretations were excellent.

Jingyao (421–492) studied Mahāyāna Buddhism for ten years before
becoming a master herself. She once gave a lecture on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra at the invitation of Prince Jingling, the second son of the Qi emperor, in 490. When she became an abbess, four hundred disciples studied under her.

Jingxing (444–509) studied the *Tattvasiddhi-śāstra* or *Satyasiddhi-śāstra* (*Chengshi lun*), the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Jushe lun*), the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, and the *Flower Garland Sūtra* from the time she entered the monastic life at the age of seventeen. When she first encountered a topic, she grasped its meaning right away. She was studious about searching out the nuances and profundities. Whenever she gave a lecture on the scriptures, the audience numbered several hundred persons.

Miaowei (444–513) was a bright and witty conversationalist. She gave over thirty lectures on the *Great Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Treatise of the Ten Stages* (*Shidi jinglun*).

Faxuan (434–516) studied the *Monastic Rules in Ten Recitations* of the Sarvāstivāda school under a Vinaya master and became so proficient a lecturer, her fame spread beyond the immediate region. Xiao Yuanjian (d. 519), prince of Hengyang of the Liang dynasty, asked her to serve as his mother’s religious instructor.

Baochang showed special interest in those nuns who were experts at chanting sutras. They could chant an entire sutra within a very short period of time. For instance, Zhixian (ca. 300–ca. 370), who was an expert in the *Lotus Sūtra*, could chant its entirety in one day and one night, even in her old age. According to Kathryn Tsai, this required chanting about fifty words per minute nonstop for a 24-hour period, and if she took any rest, she would have had to chant much faster (Tsai 1994, 121). Sengduan (ca. 378–448) could chant the *Great Nirvāṇa Sūtra* in only five days. This required that she chant at the rate of 7.5 words per second to finish the sutra of 350,000 words (Tsai 1994, 132). Huiyu, another speed chanter, could chant the *Lotus*, Śūrangama, and other scriptures in a period of only ten days. Sengnian (415–504) loved to chant the *Lotus Sūtra*, and she did it seven times in a day and a night. Since there are a minimum of 500,000 words, chanting the sutra seven times in a day and a night would require chanting approximately 20,800 words per hour—that is, 347 words per minute or 5.7 words per second (Tsai 1994, 144).

Some nuns were famous not only for the speed of their chanting but also for the frequency. For instance, Daoshou chanted the *Lotus Sūtra* three thousand times and frequently saw auspicious omens. In 439, on the seventh day of the ninth month, a jeweled canopy descended and hovered over her. Chanting the sutra three thousand times would have taken her eight years, chanting nonstop, at a rate of one second per word (Tsai 1994, 130).
Updates to The Lives of Nuns

The Continued Lives of Nuns, compiled in the twentieth century by the monk Zhenhua, has six fascicles and contains the biographies of two hundred nuns. The first fascicle covers the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) periods and contains thirty-five biographies; the second covers the Five Dynasties (907–960) and the Song (960–1279) and has thirty biographies; the third covers the Yuan (1271–1368) and the Ming (1368–1644) and has twenty biographies; the fourth and the fifth cover the Qing (1644–1911) and present eighty-six biographies; and finally, the sixth features twenty-seven nuns who lived in the Republican period (1912–1949). The lengths of the biographies vary greatly. When eulogies were available, Zhenhua copied them almost word for word. These biographies are lengthy and can run several pages. Others, however, contain only a few lines. Most of the biographies from the Republican period were based on information that Zhenhua gathered from talking with people who knew the subjects. They thus have a sense of immediacy lacking in the other accounts. While the general categories used in discussing the earlier collection of lives are applicable here, one striking difference is the number of nuns who practiced Chan Buddhism, reflecting its growing popularity from Tang times. These women studied with some of the most prominent Chan masters of their age—Huìneng (638–713), Dahui (1089–1163), Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1058–1115), Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323), Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615), and Miyun Yuanwu (1566–1642). In these cases, like entries in the conventional Lamp Records, only exchanges with the masters were recorded; biographical details are minimal, if given at all. Fewer of the later nuns achieved fame on account of their literary abilities. Still, for those so recognized, their biographies contain only their poems, paralleling the ones that contain only Chan repartee.

A second major departure from the earlier biographies is the small number of self-immolators. Only three biographies out of the two hundred mention four nuns who performed this act. The first is about two sisters who lived in the Tang; their names are not provided. The second is about Fayun, who also lived in the Tang. All three were devotees of the Lotus Sūtra and chanted it throughout their lives. After they died by immolation, their tongues remained red and intact. The last story is about Huangxin, who was a prostitute before she became a nun in 1219. She vowed to cast a bronze bell weighing 48,000 catties. But this proved difficult, and after eight tries, the bell still could not be successfully cast. Thinking that this must be due to her lack of sincerity, she threw herself into the foundry during the ninth try, and only then was the bell successfully completed.
Another nun, Fazhen of the Song, sacrificed herself for the Dharma in another fashion. While she stayed at the Jisha Yansheng Monastery in Suzhou, she made a vow to have the Tripitaka carved and printed. To fulfill this vow, she cut off her arm and for thirty years devoted herself to the sutra project. Many donors responded to her appeal. Some exhausted their wealth and even sold their children in the process. After Fazhen passed away, her disciples followed her example, cutting off their arms to carry out the work. It took three generations of nuns to complete the project.

The ability to chant sutras was still considered a trait of sainthood. The Lotus remained the favorite, followed closely by the Diamond, Flower Garland, and the Smaller Amitābha sutras. The Perfection of Wisdom and the Vimalakirti sutras are only occasionally mentioned. In terms of religious practice, Chan and Pure Land dominated. The ability to compose commentaries, give lectures on the sutras, or observe the Vinaya rules get scant mention, however.

From some of the biographies, nuns seem to have been quite free to combine elements from different Buddhist schools in their practices. For instance, we are told that Jingzhen of the Tang loved to chant the Diamond Sūtra. She chanted it all together 100,000 times. In 660, she fell ill and told her disciples that within five months she had seen Amitābha ten times, witnessed the Pure Land twice, and five times received the prediction that she would become a Buddha and achieve the superior-superior grade of rebirth. The Pure Land faith is normally associated more with the Pure Land sutras, such as the Smaller Amitābha Sūtra, the Larger Amitābha Sūtra, or the Meditation Sūtra (Guan Wuliangshou jing), than with the Diamond Sūtra.

Similarly, some nuns apparently paid little attention to the conventional groupings of Buddhist icons. For instance, Zhizang worshiped Bodhisattva Dizang and hoped to be reborn in the Pure Land. She had a painting made with Amitābha in the center flanked by Guanyin and Dizang on either side. She installed it in her house and faithfully worshiped it daily. In 980 a storm destroyed her house and she lost the painting. Praying to Dizang earnestly, she saw an object descend from the sky; it was none other than the painting. She told her disciples and friends in 982, “Dizang Bodhisattva is leading me to the Pure Land. I shall go tomorrow.” She then chanted the names of the Three Honored Ones (Amitābha, Guanyin, and Dizang) 108 times. Traditionally, it is Guanyin, not Dizang, who is the attendant of Amitābha and who welcomes the dying to the Pure Land. Furthermore, the pairing of Dizang and Guanyin as attendants of Amitābha is not attested in scriptures, however, from art historical evidence, we know that this pairing became very popular after the Tang (Yao and Yü 2009).
In recent years, scholars have made great strides in the study of nuns and Buddhist women of the Song and Qing periods. Miriam Levering (1982, 1992, 1999, 2000) focused on the female Chan masters trained under Dahui. Although Chan practice in these periods engaged in rhetoric of equality based on the philosophy of nonduality, the institutional setting was not in fact hospitable to women practitioners. Ding-hua Hsieh (1999, 2000) studies the convents of the Song. Both Levering and Hsieh note the peculiar expression *da zhangfu* (great hero), used by male teachers to refer to praiseworthy female Chan masters. The implication of the rhetoric of heroism is of course that these female masters were exceptions and not representative of nuns in general. They had transcended the limitations of gender, and it was exactly for this reason that they should be emulated. Clearly, since ordinary nuns did not achieve this appellation, they were not treated as equal to their male counterparts.

Beata Grant’s work has concentrated on nuns and Buddhist laywomen who lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1994, 2001a, 2001b, 2008, 2009). Some nuns were abbesses and Dharma teachers. Some were poets who through their literary accomplishment, participated in and contributed to the Buddhism of the Song and the late imperial period. Through these activities and accomplishments, they raised the profile of nuns and received recognition from literati and officials, who often became their followers and patrons.

The 265 nuns discussed in the *Lives* and *Continued Lives* constitute only a tiny sample of the nuns who lived in the sixteen centuries the two works cover. The very fact that they were patronized by the emperors and the royal family, were admired by the wealthy and powerful, built temples, and led large numbers of monastics and laypeople meant that they were not ordinary nuns. It is clear that nuns in the *Lives* came from elite social backgrounds. Even in the *Continued Lives*, where we find more diversity, the featured women still represent the exception rather than the rule, and precisely because they stood out from the masses, their stories were collected and retold.

I have tried here to identify the chief qualities responsible for their fame and success, but I am also interested in teasing out the gender differences in nuns’ and monks’ reputations. Generally speaking, it is hard to detect much difference. In terms of their asceticism, ability to work miracles, willingness to sacrifice their lives for the Dharma, expertise in sutra exposition, and ability to achieve great feats of chanting scripture, the nuns noted were in no way inferior to monks. While it is true that we do not find women translators, this was no doubt due to their lack of opportunity. Most of these women were literate and some were quite scholarly as lecturers and writers of commentaries, but they were simply not
invited to participate in translation projects. The nuns who wrote commentaries were clearly proficient in their understanding of doctrines, and it is a great pity that none of their texts have been preserved.

ACCOUNTS OF NUNS IN LITERATURE

Obstacles to studying Chinese Buddhist nuns are not limited to the scarcity and scattered nature of the primary sources. Another factor is the bias against them in literary accounts where nuns were seen as pitiful and unfortunate. The traditional view was that no woman would enter the “door of emptiness” unless she were forced to by circumstance. Since a woman could not live on her own without a man in patriarchal Chinese society, the only way she could survive was to become a nun, a maidservant, or a prostitute.

Like monks, nuns in traditional China were censured by Confucian literati-officials because they did not marry and bear children; they thus were regarded as selfish and unfilial by society at large. They were blamed for not contributing to economic production because they did not engage in farming and weaving. Nuns suffered additional societal censure because they defied the dictates of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (sancong side) and instead opted for independence. Moreover, starting in the Southern Song (1127–1279), nuns were accused of an outright crime: acting as go-betweens for illicit affairs. Due to the freedom they had to visit women in their homes, nuns were suspected of arranging trysts with admirers that would be consummated in secret chambers built for such purposes in the temples. Critics also said that when they encouraged laywomen to come to temples to worship or go on pilgrimages to make merit, in fact they were conning gentry women into making donations. Buddhist nuns were customarily counted among the so-called sangu liupo (literally, “three aunties and six grannies,” a gaggle of meddling women), proverbially notorious troublemakers and women of dubious moral character. This view of nuns was so widespread that not only writers of novels and drama but also literati essayists used it as a standard trope. The early Ming writer Tao Zungyi (fl. 1300–1360), for instance, in his Taking a Break from Farming in Southern Village (Nancun zhuigeng lu), has this to say about them:

The three aunties are nigu (Buddhist nuns), daogu (Daoist nuns), and guagu (female fortune-tellers). The six grannies are yapo (marriage go-between engaged in human trafficking), meipo (marriage go-between), shipo (female instructor), qianpo (witch), yaopo (female doctor), and wenpo (midwife). They are as vicious as the three penal punishments and six
disasters. When a household is visited by one of the above, it is seldom that it does not fall into licentiousness and thievery. If one is cautious, stay far away from them as one would snakes and scorpions. This might be said to be the method of purifying the household. (10:126)

One can find similar statements in novels such as the two collections of tales entitled *Striking the Table in Amazement* (*Paì'ān jìngqì*), as well as *Gold Vase Plum* (*Jìn píng méi*), *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglòu mèng*), and handbooks instructing local officials how to rule and heads of households how to govern. The message is always that local officials should treat nuns as morally dubious characters in the same category as keepers of tea and wine shops, madams of brothels, and so forth. Similarly, good families must keep nuns at arm’s length to protect their women from bad influences. The Ming novelist Ling Mengchu in the first collection of *Striking the Table* declares,

Buddhist nuns are most vicious. Using the pretext of the Buddha and the convents as refuge, they lure womenfolk of gentry families to burn incense and young men to come to visit. Behaving no differently from monks, they interact with men with ease. But because they are women, they can also enter the inner chambers of womenfolk to recite sutras and chant the Buddha’s name. As a result of their ease of interaction with men and women, nine out of ten incidents of illicit meetings between men and women in convents are engineered by nuns. (1628/1995, 58)

A popular saying of the period that reflects this common prejudice ran: “Don’t invite in, for any reason, a nun, a monk, an adept, a wet nurse, or a granny moneylender” (Cass 1999, 47). Susan Mann cites the negative attitude of a Qing official, Huang Liuhong, toward nuns as typical of his contemporaries. He called nuns “female ruffians” and asked his fellow officials to prohibit them from visiting households of good families.

Female intermediaries, such as marriage brokers, procuresses, female quacks, midwives, sorceresses, or Buddhist or Taoist nuns, often act as go-betweens for people indulging in sexual debauchery. Many innocent women from good families are enticed by these female ruffians to engage in licentious acts. The magistrate should… post notices to the effect that Buddhist and Taoist nuns should remain in their monasteries performing their religious duties, and are not permitted to visit any household. (Mann 1997, 191)
A more damaging public image was that of nuns as courtesans. Because some convents were notorious for entertaining male visitors, the entire population of nuns came under suspicion. According to Lei Rouxin, the Luminous Cause Convent (Mingyin An) in Hangzhou, was one of the largest and most well-known convents in Jiangnan (the Lower Yangzi area) during the Southern Song period, and it continued to flourish throughout the late imperial period. In the Southern Song it had a 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” (Lei 2006, 30, cited by Grant 2009, 2). Later, during the Ming-Qing period, the term huachan (flower Chan) came into currency to refer to nuns who entertained male visitors. It was at this time that “the transformation of nuns into prostitutes reached its zenith” (Lei 2006, 36, cited by Grant 2009, 2).

This same prejudice against nuns continued in the Qing (1644–1911). Zhu Yizun (1629–1709), a famous poet and scholar, lumped all nuns together and chastised them for being licentious, lazy, and up to no good. Part of a poem he wrote describes nuns thus:

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?\(^5\)

Reflecting societal views of its time, the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* depicts most of the nuns who appear in it as worldly and promiscuous. They usually are said to come from the same background as actresses and are similarly “rented” to “perform” for special occasions (Mann 1999, 192).

In addition to the negative image of nuns as troublemakers of immoral character, their other prevailing image was as figures of tragedy. Speaking of nuns in the early twentieth century, Wing-tsit Chan declares in his *Religious Trends in Modern China* that the three main reasons a woman would become a nun were poverty, chronic illness, and disappointment in love. He assumes that no woman would voluntarily enter the “gate of emptiness” (1953, 80–82).

Such prejudices did not much lessen over the course of the twentieth century. Let me cite a striking example. In 1989, students of the Dance Department
at the Taiwan National Academy of Arts planned to perform the popular Chinese opera called *Longing for the Secular Life* (*Si fan*). The opera was written by an anonymous author in the southern style of drama known as *kunqu*, which was popular in the Yuan period (1206–1368). This particular work, which takes only about twenty minutes to perform, has enjoyed great popularity in China since 1700. It was usually performed as a prelude to more extensive and formal pieces (Goldman 2001). An essential play in the training of young actors who played female roles, it is alluded to in the film *Farewell My Concubine*, where the protagonist who plays the nun has to demonstrate having mastered it before he can be certified by his teacher. He is punished severely because instead of singing, “A young nun am I, sixteen years of age,” he sings, “A young man am I, sixteen years of age.”

Lin Yutang cited this very work as a “refined example of the literary handling of the sexual problems of the monks” in his *My Country and My People* (1935, 128). Lin translated its opening passages:

A young nun am I, sixteen years of age;  
My head is shaven in my young maidenhood.  
For my father, he loves the Buddhist sutras,  
And my mother, she loves the Buddhist priests.  
Morning and night, morning and night,  
I burn incense and I pray. For I  
Was born a sickly child, full of ills.  
So they decided to send me here  
Into this monastery.  
Amitabha, Amitabha!  
Unceasingly I pray.  
Oh, tired am I of the humming of the drums and the tinkling of the bells;  
Tired am I of the droning of the prayers and crooning of the priors;  
The chatter and the clatter of unintelligible charms,  
The clamor and the clangor of interminable chants,  
The mumbling and the murmuring of monotonous psalms.  
*Prajñāparamita, Mayura-sūtra, Saddharmapundarika—*  
Oh, how I hate them all!  
While I say *mitabha*, I sigh for my beau.  
While I chant *saparah*, my heart palpitates so!  
Ah, let me take a little stroll,  
Let me take a little stroll.  
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
In the next passages she makes fun of the *lohans* in the Five Hundred Lohans’ Hall.

Whence comes this burning, suffocating ardor?
Whence comes this strange, infernal, unearthly ardor?
I’ll tear these monkish robes!
I’ll bury all the Buddhist sutras;
I’ll drown the wooden fish,
And leave all the monastic sutras!
I’ll leave the drums,
I’ll leave the bells,
And the chants, and the yells,
And all the interminable, exasperating, religious chatter!
I’ll go downhill, and find me a young and handsome lover—
Let him scold me, beat me!
Kick or ill-treat me!
I will not become a buddha!
I will not mumble *mita, prajna, para*! (130–131)

This opera not only depicts the young nun as a worldly creature tormented by sexual desire but also demonizes institutional Buddhism as inhumane in its suppression of that same desire, which the audience believes to be natural. From the Buddhist point of view, both are gross distortions, for returning to lay life when celibacy cannot be maintained has always been an option. For centuries, Buddhists had to endure this defamation without being able to do anything about it.

A staple in the traditional repertoire, the opera was performed in Taiwan as late as 1979 without incident. Ten years later, however, things changed. In 1989, under the leadership of a young activist nun named Zhaohui (1957–), who had formed an organization called the Association for Defending Buddhism, the Buddhist position saw a better outcome. Starting from January 14, when Zhaohui first learned about the impending performances on January 27–29, she wrote letters of protest to the Ministry of Education, which had authority over the content of performances, as well as to the administrators of the Academy of Arts and to newspapers and media. She generated enormous support from fellow Buddhists and ordinary citizens. At the height of the protest, a man identifying himself as a Buddhist devotee threatened to immolate himself in front of the theater if the opera went on as planned. Eventually, a compromise was reached that, though not entirely satisfying the Buddhist community, was the best option possible at that time. The opera went on as planned, with two provisions: first, the heroine
should not be identified as a Buddhist nun. It was suggested that if she carried a fly-whisk, she could be a Daoist priestess. This is rather far-fetched because all the references in the libretto are Buddhist. Secondly, therefore, the Ministry of Education promised to have the libretto revised. This opera has not been staged again since (Bei ge si fan chuanji 1989; Tao 1995, 144–160).

Another example I would like to cite is the so-called Zhongtai Incident (Zhongtai shijian). In September 1996, when the summer vacation ended, about one hundred women college students who participated in the Buddhist Studies Summer Camp run by the Zhongtai Chan Monastery of Puli in central Taiwan did not return home. This greatly alarmed their parents. Monastery-sponsored summer camps became very popular in Taiwan starting in the 1980s. This was one of the most common ways for college students to come in contact with Buddhism, other than joining student clubs known as Buddhist studies societies (foxueshe), a subject I will take up in chapter 4. In those days, there were no college courses offered on Buddhism, and monks and nuns were forbidden by law to give talks on campus. It turned out that these college students had taken group ordination at Zhongtai. Refusing to believe that their daughters chose this of their own free will, the parents accused the temple of indoctrinating the young women and launched a campaign in the media to attack the temple. Some parents even tried to kidnap their daughters to save them from being “brainwashed.” Though this instance is probably the most famous, it was not an isolated case. As I will discuss in a later chapter, when a law student from the National Taiwan University chose to join the Incense Light Bhikṣunī Sangha in 1990, that also created a huge sensation. Her family accused the temple of pressuring her to join. This came to be known as the B.A. Nun Incident (xueshini shijian). Public opinion about these incidents was sharply divided. The majority of critics condemned the young women for wasting the education that their parents had worked hard to provide and thus being unfilial. Some other enlightened individuals called for better communication between generations so that parents could understand their children’s way of thinking. The public outcry reflected the traditional view that to become a nun represents a sort of failure. When an educated woman can find a good husband and be a professional woman as well, who in her right mind would want to become a nun?

Life in a nunnery is still seen as a last resort, and no woman can be imagined to want to live there if there are other options. An example of this continuing ambivalence can be found in contemporary literature. Chen Ruoxi (b. 1938), a famous Taiwanese woman author, focuses on nuns in two recent novels, The Story of Taiwan’s Nuns (Huixinlian, 2000) and Return to Peach Blossom Spring (Chong-fan taohua yuan, 2002).
After studying in the United States, Chen went to China in 1966 with her husband and lived there for seven years. She first attracted international attention with her novels about the Cultural Revolution, which she began writing after leaving China for Hong Kong in 1973; the most famous of these is *The Execution of Mayor Yin* (*Yin Xianchang*). She then lived in Canada and San Francisco until 1995, when she returned to Taiwan for good. Chen is a writer of realism, and women always play important roles in her novels. However, until these two novels, she never thought to write about Buddhist nuns. In the preface to *The Story of Taiwan’s Nuns* Chen describes how she began to read Buddhist publications in the 1990s and became much inspired by Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao*), the predominant form of Buddhism practiced in Taiwan, which she thought would serve as a force to revive Buddhism in East Asia. She was also much impressed by the achievement of Taiwanese nuns. She was encouraged to use Buddhist themes in her writing by Jiang Zanteng, a scholar of Taiwanese Buddhism, and the impetus to write the first novel came from the disastrous earthquake of September 21, 1999. This work represents a new departure in Chen’s writing career, but it also reflects the new high profile of Buddhist nuns in Taiwanese society (Chen 2000, 3–4).

Still, Chen’s novels carry both negative and positive attitudes toward women who become nuns. They represent both the traditional prejudices and the more progressive and affirmative attitude about the “new nun” in contemporary society. The first novel presents a positive picture; its title comes from three characters in the names of the three female protagonists: Tu Meihui, Tu Meixin, and Wang Huilian—thus “Huixinlian.” Meihui and Meixin are sisters, and Huilian is Meihui’s daughter. The novel begins with Meihui receiving the tonsure in 1975 when she is twenty-six years old. She enters the order because of a failed marriage and other misfortunes in life. We gradually learn that as a teenager she was sexually abused by her stepfather. After she got married, her husband unfairly suspected that she was unfaithful because the children did not resemble him. He beat her and left her for another woman. She became estranged from her daughter, who was brought up by her ex-husband and his mother. Meihui saw herself as a victim, “The marriage failed and there is nowhere for me to turn. The sangha is my last chance to survive” (2000, 23). When asked by a fellow nun why more women than men leave home, she answered, “This is because the common lot of women is very bitter. This must be because we have created a lot of bad karma in our previous lives.” She advises the fellow nun to chant the Sutra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Seven Buddhas of Lapis Lazuli Radiance, the Masters of Healing (*Yaoshi liuliguang qifo benyuangongde jing*), which promises,
Introduction

among other benefits, that a woman who detests her female form and calls the Medicine Buddha’s name will be transformed into the body of a man right away and become enlightened (2000, 47). Meihui initially shares the traditional view about the inferiority of women, but over the course of the novel she gradually becomes a modern nun reflecting the ethos of Humanistic Buddhism. An anonymous donor (who turns out to be her repentant stepfather) enables her to go to the United States and earn a master’s degree. When she returns to Taiwan, she becomes abbess of her temple and teaches at a university. As a Buddhist leader, she promotes education, reduces the performance of rituals for the dead, and establishes a temple exclusively for nuns. Instead of seeking donations from the faithful to expand or refurbish the temple, she tells her followers, “I promote the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism and believe that we should first enter the world (rushi) and then transcend the world (chushi). We must elevate the Buddhadharma by serving society. We advocate ‘the purification of the mind of human beings’ (jin-ghua renxin), which is the same as helping the poor and saving those who suffer” (2000, 141). She establishes a shelter for child prostitutes and women who suffer from domestic violence as concrete ways to carry out this idea. By the 1990s, one could readily find similar sentiments expressed by real nuns in Taiwan.

In November 1996 Wang Huilian, Meihui’s daughter, also decides to become a nun and receives the tonsure from her own mother at her temple. Huilian graduated from Tsinghua University with a major in history. Why does she become a nun? In sharp contrast to her mother, she does not do so because of disappointment in love or any misfortune in life. Instead it is because she is inspired by the lifestyle of the nuns and wants to contribute to society.

I feel I have already been blessed with an abundance of love. I want to share it with other people, the more the better. I have long wished to live a happy and fulfilling life in which each person helps the other and, while everyone takes whatever he needs, all contribute to the same common community. But I did not know what shape this kind of life would be until I went to Haikuang Si [her mother’s temple]. There I saw all the nuns happily read sutras, sweep the floor, wash dishes… I then realized that this was indeed the lifestyle I had dreamed about for a long time. (2000, 63)

Over two decades, the motive for becoming a nun as exemplified by this mother and daughter has changed noticeably. While the mother was driven to seek refuge in a Buddhist temple, the daughter chooses the life of a nun out of a desire to serve society. It is also not by accident that Huilian is a college graduate, for this indeed
Passing the Light reflects the social reality in Taiwan, that many nuns are highly educated college graduates.

In addition to depicting the changing image of nuns, Chen’s novel provides a window into the chaotic and troublesome scene created by the many new religions that emerged in Taiwan over the last decades of the twentieth century. We see this through the story of Meixin, the younger sister of Meihui the abbess. Meixin is at first vain and materialistic. But after she becomes interested in religion, she drifts from one to another until she becomes blindly devoted to a “Golden-bodied Living Buddha” who enjoys fame as a healer. She is devastated when the master tries to seduce her. After she refuses his advances, he ostracizes her by having his followers spread rumors, charging her with seduction. Thanks to the help of her older sister the nun, she files suit and wins a monetary settlement from the master, which she promptly donates to her sister’s temple to be used to establish a shelter for women who suffer from domestic violence. When the stepfather dies, he leaves all his property to the temple as well. The novel ends on a positive note, affirming the progressive spirit of Humanistic Buddhism.

Chen’s second novel, however, casts nuns in a negative light. The main protagonist, the nun Yuzhen, eventually returns to lay life and marries a much older widower mainly because she learns the truth of her master’s sexual misconduct. Like the “Living Buddha” in the first novel, the abbess in this story turns out to be a charlatan. Her secret life is exposed when her toilet has to be repaired because it becomes clogged with discarded condoms. What is most amazing about these two masters is that their secret is well known among their most intimate followers. Incidents of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct among religious teachers, including Buddhist ones, became public in Taiwan during the 1990s, and the author’s decision to highlight these reflects a traditional anticlerical prejudice that regards temples and convents as potential places for secret debauchery, a view repeatedly expressed in traditional literati writings and popular literature.

Are the images of nuns today substantially different from the traditional ones described above? According to Chern Meei-Hwa, who studies references to Buddhist nuns in newspapers published since the 1960s, the images remain both positive and negative. Nuns are certainly seen as “other” (Chern 2001). Their negative image persists, as is reflected in most responses to the question of why someone would choose to become a nun. Shiu-kuen Fan Tsung carried out fieldwork in three Hakka villages—Taoyuan, Xinzhu, and Miaoli—in 1970s Taiwan. There nuns were thought either to be unattractive or to have suffered disappointment in love or marriage and thus needed to “escape from society.” Because of this prevailing attitude, when a girl who was not unattractive chose to become a nun,
men would say, “I don’t understand why she wants to leave home (chujia). She is not bad looking. Fair skin, large round eyes, attractive face, good body build” (Tsung 1978, 168).

The persistence of such sentiments is hard to understand, for Buddhism has been undergoing a great resurgence in Taiwan during the last several decades. Since the 1970s, and particularly since 1987 when national security laws were lifted, new developments in Buddhism have attracted the attention of both the media and academics in Taiwan and abroad. These are represented by the increased number of new temples, monastic complexes, and Buddhist universities, but also by young people joining monastic orders. Two characteristics stand out about Buddhism in Taiwan: the emphasis on Buddhists’ active engagement with society under the rubric of Humanistic Buddhism, and the striking ratio of nuns to monks. Both are new in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

**BUDDHISM IN TAIWAN TODAY**

The term “Humanistic Buddhism” has been used by three Buddhist leaders in Taiwan: Xingyun (1927–), Shengyan (1931–2009), and Zengyan (1937–). It was first coined by Yinshun (1906–2005) who, through his prodigious writings and wide circle of disciples, is universally regarded as the most influential thinker in modern Chinese Buddhism. Yinshun advocated Humanistic Buddhism based on his belief that “The Buddha is in the human realm” (Fo zai renjian) but not in the other five realms. He explained how he came to this realization:

> I read the *Ekottarāgama* and learned that “All Buddhas become enlightened in the human realm, but not in heaven…. I thus became convinced that the Buddhadharma was “the Buddha in the human realm” and it means that “the human being is the principal manifestation” of the Buddhadharma. (1989, 3)

Humanistic Buddhism differs from “Buddhism for Human Life” (*rensheng fojiao*) only in one character. The latter term was used by Taixu, who in the first half of the twentieth century emphasized that the purpose of Buddhism is the improvement of society and betterment of the world. Buddhism is concerned with human beings, not gods and ghosts. In his essay “The Purpose of Buddhism for Human Life,” Taixu lists improving human life as the first of four goals, the other three being a better rebirth, release from *samsara*, and complete insight into reality. To improve human life Buddhists had to purify society through philanthropy, educa-
tion, and culture (Taixu 1971, 5:234–236). These are exactly the areas into which all contemporary Buddhist leaders in Taiwan put their proselytizing energy. Like the engaged Buddhism promoted by American Buddhists, Humanistic Buddhism is characterized by an activist social concern.

Criticisms of the traditional Buddhist orientation toward life after death and of the prevalence of death rituals among monastic activities have led to a reexamination of nuns’ position in the Buddhist community. As many scholars have pointed out, the most glaring example of the nuns’ subordination to monks is the Eight Rules of Respect. Zhaohui, the activist nun mentioned earlier, is a faithful disciple of Yinshun. On March 31, 2001, at a conference celebrating Yinshun’s ninety-seventh birthday, she formally announced that the rules would be abolished and had the eight guests representing the four constituencies of the sangha—monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen—symbolically tear large paper posters on which each of the rules was written. These rules have been hotly debated among monastics in Taiwan (Richard and Johnson, 1997), and Zhaohui cited Yinshun as her authority for their repeal. Yinshun stated that according to Buddhadharma, men and women do not differ in faith, virtue, or wisdom. Both can cultivate the way and achieve liberation. Physiological differences have nothing to do with spiritual equality. The subordination of female to male monastics reflected the social realities of ancient India. Yinshun concluded, “Buddhism has been controlled by monks for over two thousand years. The spirit of gender equality was not promulgated. Not only did the female assembly not receive any assistance and elevation, they were on the contrary denigrated and despised due to gender discrimination. So much so that women are regarded as incorrigible and uneducable. This is indeed a distortion of the Buddhadharma” (Yinshun 1988, 171–172). This positive and progressive view, however, has not been universally embraced. Taixu, in a letter to women Buddhists in Hong Kong dated 1933, encouraged them to practice Buddhism at home like Queen Śrīmālā, and did not approve of their becoming nuns (Taixu 1971, 26:282). Moreover, in another article written in 1935, he advocated that reducing the number of nuns to a minimum would improve the quality of the sangha (Taixu 1971, 17:275). Just as Taixu and Yinshun expressed different attitudes about women and nuns, the same variety of opinions on the Eight Rules may be found among nun leaders in Taiwan.

Buddhist leaders in Taiwan since the latter part of the twentieth century have been critical about the traditional treatment of nuns. Yinshun and Shengyan publicly announced in March 1965 that Buddhists in Taiwan need not “overly stress” the Eight Rules of Respect (Jiang 1993, 84–85). Since then, the activist Zhaohui has been able to openly challenged these rules, while other nuns (and
monks) have taken a more moderate position. Wuyin, a great promoter of the study of Vinaya, has this to say about the Eight Rules:

While initially one could think that the eight *gurudharma* indicate that bhikshunis were seen as inferior, from another angle, one sees that the Buddha put responsibility on the bhikshus to aid and support the bhikshunis sangha. The bhikshus are not to ignore bhikshunis, but to help them to actualize the path…. In my thinking, having both men and women in the sangha made the situation more complex. Because of that, the Buddha warned us that if we did not practice the Dharma with commitment, the existence of the Dharma would be shortened. We must find means to work with this more complex situation so that it will have a positive, not a negative, impact on the existence of the Dharma. For this reason, the Buddha affirmed the bhikshus' leadership of the sangha in the *gurudharma*…. His main concern was not women's spiritual capabilities. Rather, he knew that if the relationship between the two sanghas was not healthy, the Dharma would be the victim. His warning enables us to be careful and to preserve the Dharma. (Shi Wuyin 2001, 88–89)

Male Buddhist teachers in Taiwan today look upon the ordination of nuns with favor. Efforts have also been made to reintroduce the order of nuns to those Buddhist countries where it had disappeared. One example is Xingyun's sponsorship of international ordination ceremonies, the most notable being the one carried out in February 1998 at Bodhgaya, India. When the twenty Sri Lankan candidates returned home, they restored the order of nuns in their country after a lapse of nine centuries (Tsomo 1999, 13). Taiwan has become a center where female Buddhist novitiates, Asian and non-Asian, from all Buddhist traditions—Theravadin, Zen, and Tibetan—can receive training and full ordination.

Xingyun and Shengyan, the founders of the Buddha Light and Dharma Drum monastic complexes, are both monks, while Zhengyan is undoubtedly the most famous nun in Taiwan. All three have been much influenced by Yinshun. Hailed as the “Mother Teresa of Taiwan” after receiving the social welfare prize from the government of the Philippines in 1992, Zhengyan founded the Merit Association of Compassionate Relief (Ciji Gongde Hui), a grassroots lay organization (Huang and Weller 1998; Huang 2009) that has become something of a movement among overseas Chinese in fourteen countries. There are forty-three branches in the United States alone. Zhengyan’s emphasis on social relief and service has put a new face on Buddhism and challenged the common concep-
tion of it as an otherworldly, individualistic, and escapist religion. But she is by no means the only Buddhist teacher with this message. Xingyun and Shengyan also emphasize how Buddhism is not just for individual salvation but also for the good of society and the welfare of humankind. Although the communities led by Xingyun and Shengyan consist of both monks and nuns, nuns are by far the majority and they play leadership roles. Buddha Light, for instance, has about one thousand members, of whom over nine hundred are nuns. The Zhongtai Monastery mentioned earlier now has even more members than Buddha Light, and again they are mostly nuns.

This is in fact true for Taiwanese Buddhism in general. From 1953 to 1998, during the forty-five years since the first ordination of nuns at the Daxian Si in 1953, more than twelve thousand nuns have received full ordination. They make up 75 percent of the total ordained monastics (Yao 1984, 117–131). While one estimate put the ratio of nuns to monks at 4 to 1 (Li 2000, 1, 353), others put it even higher. According to Huiben, the head of the board of directors of the Kaohsiung Buddhist Association, Taiwan had about fifty thousand monks and nuns in 1998. Nuns were the majority and the figure was expected to increase in the future. He estimated the ratio of nuns to monks at an incredible 9 to 1 (Huiben 1998).

Nuns in Taiwan have attracted attention not only because of their numbers but also because of their level of education. Many have received at least a high school education and often some college; some have gone abroad to Japan, the United States, England, and other countries to pursue advanced degrees. Like professional women in Taiwan, nuns engage in teaching, social work, research and writing, editing magazines, and producing radio and television programs, as well as managing temples using modern techniques like company executives. The large-scale influx of college-educated women into nunhood took off between 1978 and 1983, and represents the cohort born between 1956 and 1961. It occurred ten to fifteen years after the government established mandatory nine-year public education for all beginning in 1968. While in traditional China, monasteries were often the only place that provided an opportunity for poor children to receive an education, the situation is the opposite now. The women who became nuns in the 1980s were already educated, and they brought changes to the management and functions of monasteries. For these nuns, the Buddhist temple was clearly not an escape from life, but an open place where they could develop their talents and fulfill their aspirations.

Unlike most monastic communities in Taiwan, which consist of both monks and nuns, Incense Light is a single-sex community. In 1998, when I resided in their
home temple in the hills outside Chiayi, it had only been in existence for twenty-three years. Its establishment coincides with the period of Buddhist revival. It was initially a small community, with only 119 members, 85 percent of whom had either technical college or university education. While about half lived at the home temple, the rest resided in five branch-temples located in Kaohsiung, Taipei, Taichung, Miaoli, and downtown Chiayi. During the eight months I stayed at the home temple, I visited all five branch-temples at different times and stayed in each for about a week. I interviewed thirty nuns who entered the sangha in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of them by then held important positions. This was supplemented by questionnaires sent to all members (of whom fifty replied) and twenty-two autobiographies written by younger nuns who had joined the community since 1989. My research was facilitated by materials published by the community. They own a press that publishes Chinese translations of Japanese, Thai, and more recently, English books on Buddhism (mostly in the areas of Vinaya and meditation); a quarterly magazine, Xiangguang zhuangyan (Adornment of Incense Light), which is mailed to lay and monastic readers for free; two periodicals, one edited by members of the regular sangha, Fanwangji (Collection of Brahma’s net), and the other edited by students of Incense Light Buddhist Seminary, Qingsong mengya (Young shoots of green pine); and finally, a newsletter, the Neixun (Internal news). The latter three are for internal circulation. Wuyin is very interested in recordkeeping and the profusion of publications produced by the community was her conscious plan.

My decision to write a book about contemporary Taiwanese nuns based on this community was not an easy one. By training I am a historian of Chinese Buddhism, and my earlier work concentrated primarily on the premodern period. However, I have always been interested in Buddhism and gender. In recent years, I have been teaching a course, “Buddhism and Women in China,” and questions about Buddhist attitudes toward women in both scriptures and institutional settings, women as patrons and practitioners, and how Buddhism both constrained and empowered women in Chinese history have become increasingly pressing. Taiwanese Buddhist nuns, like Taiwanese Buddhism, have provided an avenue for this investigation. While claiming to inherit the Chinese Buddhist tradition, Taiwanese nuns are also remaking it. In what ways have they kept the tradition and in what ways do they depart from it? Why and how is the nuns’ order growing in Taiwan? These are some of the issues I explore in the following chapters.

The physical setting of Incense Light Temple, the headquarters of the organization, is the subject of chapter 2, while the establishment of the community at this locale under Wuyin will be taken up in chapter 3. Incense Light Temple was
originally a local temple with no Buddhist history. Wūyìn and her early disciples, who formed a collective leadership, were therefore free to create a style of Buddhist practice and a form of Buddhist institution unencumbered by preexisting models.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of the Buddhist studies societies now commonly found in universities. These introduced Buddhist teachings and practices to college students who had no other way to learn about Buddhism in the period prior to 1987 when the national security law was lifted, and they played a major role in inducing large numbers of college students to enter the monastic order from the 1970s to the 1980s. Two lay Buddhists, Li Bingnan (1889–1986) and Zhou Xuande (1899–1989), were largely responsible for promoting the study of Buddhism among college students and helped to create many Buddhist studies societies on college campuses. Their activities and teachings will receive detailed treatment in this chapter.

Chapter 5 examines the entrance requirements and curriculum of the Seminary of the Incense Light Bhikṣuṇī Sangha (Xiangguang Nizhong Foxueyuan). All nuns must attend five years of seminary, whether they have prior knowledge of Buddhism or not. I shall analyze the curriculum and compare it with that of other seminaries. Although the Incense Light nuns engage in various activities, their chief mission is education. The community runs Buddhist adult classes (foxue-ban), free evening classes for the public, at their five branch-temples. No fee is charged, but students who graduate often become faithful followers and make donations. These classes thus form the economic base of the order.

Chapter 6 examines the content of the textbooks the nuns compiled for the three levels of adult classes and the teaching methods they use. I examine enrollment data from the classes to provide a profile of the student body. I also offer some hypotheses concerning the effectiveness of the classes by studying samples of homework assignments and exam essays written by the students.

Chapter 7 focuses on several nuns who entered the order in its early years and follows their careers to 1998, when I interviewed them. By then they had either obtained advanced degrees or achieved important positions in the community. The other nuns looked up to them as exemplars. I look at their family backgrounds, their motives for joining the sangha, their accomplishments and setbacks, hopes and frustrations.

By looking closely at the spiritual lives of the Incense Light nuns, I hope to say something about what makes a contemporary nun different from the women profiled in *The Lives of Nuns*. Is there any continuity in the standard of sanctity?
Or have the Incense Light nuns totally jettisoned the past? My concluding comments assess the present situation of the community and offer projections about its future development. What this particular community experiences may not represent all female monastics in Taiwan, but I hope by presenting its story in real depth, I can shed light on that bigger picture.