

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan.* By Chün-Fang Yü. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 264 pages. Cloth \$57, paper \$29.

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Departing from her primarily pre-modern focus, Chün-Fang Yü has published *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan*, an exploration into the living tradition of Buddhist nuns in Asia. Unlike other studies of Buddhist women published in recent years, Yü's stands out as the first full-length case study of a single community. Buddhist nuns have historically been characterized as appendages to more important male figures, and their religious motivations often mistaken for unfortunate necessities or escapes from troubled lives. Yü's work, premised on the question of why women become nuns and why we ought to study them, offers a valuable corrective to this outdated model. Based on extensive field research, she offers a detailed look into the Incense Light community in central Taiwan and successfully shows how this group of Taiwanese nuns inherits and remakes Chinese Buddhist tradition amidst an ever-changing culture.

Yü's first chapter constructs a brief and helpful historical survey of Buddhist nuns in China, beginning with the earliest extant records in Baochang's *The Lives of Nuns (Biqiuni zhuan)* from 516 CE (which Yü casts as a somewhat successful model for the individual biographies of Incense Light nuns that come later). Yü argues that the ambiguous position allotted to nuns in pre-modern sources, as troublemakers or tragic characters, continues to the present in Taiwanese performing arts and literature. This provides a useful framework for understanding the complicated situation out of which Incense Light developed. Chapter 2 is devoted to the physical and organizational headquarters of Incense Light, and chapter 3 to its head abbess, Wuyin (born 1940). Chapter 4 considers the role of Buddhist studies societies on college campuses in twentieth-century China to revive and promote Buddhist

studies. The remainder of the work focuses on the Incense Light community itself: its Buddhist seminary, entrance process, and teaching methods (chapter 5); Buddhist adult classes, which promote community education and also encourage people to become followers/donors (chapter 6); and individual stories of nuns in the style of *Lives of Nuns* yet with the intention of clarifying how contemporary nuns differ from the women presented in that sixth-century work (chapter 7).

Yü adeptly weaves historical information with interviews conducted with current Incense Light nuns to trace the history of the organization and its important figures, which begins with an 1876 founding myth about a Guanyin Fozu image. The image was first worshipped in a private home, then moved to various small temples until 1969, when a cement and steel temple was built and registered upon its completion in 1973. From modest beginnings, the Incense Light community expanded in size and scope, adding its own Buddhist seminary in 1980 and growing rapidly through the 1990s, so much so that a new building was constructed in 1992 to accommodate the rising membership, which consisted mostly of young college graduates.

Yü describes how Incense Light temple embodies both local cult and Buddhist streams. This, along with the organization's "revolutionary spirit" (p. 40), has led to disputes with the local community and within the temple itself. In 1997, for example, villagers tried to forcibly take control of the temple property. Yü cites Incense Light's break from traditional local temple architecture and alternative iconographical arrangement (i.e., the unusual placement of a stupa in the main hall) as factors provoking this. Internal conflict, on the other hand, arose from its leaders' divergent views on how best to configure religious life in modern society, which led to the exit of the second abbess Xinzhi (born 1939) in 1990.

Yü provides detailed biographies of Incense Light's central figures: Xinzhi, Mingjia (born 1951), and Wuyin. According to Yü, Xinzhi and Wuyin's interest in Buddhism rose from what Yü calls "aesthetic-affective experience" (p. 42), and Mingjia's from a more educational orientation. She stresses that all three Incense Light abbesses were raised in the context of Taiwanese popular religion with no direct interaction with Buddhism. In short, they chose Buddhism. Prefacing these figures is Tianyi (1924–1980), a nun who rose in Taiwanese Buddhist circles after the island came under Chinese control in 1949 and influenced the current organizational structure of Incense Light significantly, firmly believing in autonomy in leadership and temple management—a *samgha* of nuns by nuns—that emphasizes education and rotating job assignments (p. 41).

Incense Light's number of nuns increased alongside rising interest in Buddhist studies by college students in the 1960s through the 1980s, prompting Xinzhi to promote the well-educated Mingjia to the position of abbess. Mingjia and Wuyin, the following abbess, integrated teachings such as "conscious conversation" and "imaginative pedagogy" (p. 45), humanities and social sciences, psychology, and management technology into the community's core curriculum in order to promote community outreach, education, and social activities. According to Yü, this became too modern and radical for Xinzhi, and so she left.

Chapter 3 spotlights Wuyin, the third and current abbess. The winding vignette of Wuyin stresses her strong belief that education and social status are directly linked, as well as her sensitivity to gender inequality. To illustrate commonly held notions about gender in Taiwan at the time, Yü describes certain moral instruction that Wuyin likely heard as a child which often took the form of public entertainment that banked on the impurities of women (e.g., the Blood Pond Hell, the purported destination for women described in an indigenous sutra) and their limited roles (drawn from Confucian virtues). Wuyin's interest in learning and reading led her to choose the monastic life, despite the opposition of her father, and formative experiences at Xinglongsi and Yuantong Academy led her to lament the fact that Catholic nuns could be religious teachers but Buddhist nuns endured a "simple and severe" (p. 61) life of performing rituals and tending rice fields. Despite leaving Taiwan to pursue a graduate education in Hawaii, Wuyin was called back to become abbess in 1980.

Most Incense Light nuns, including the founding abbesses, were attracted to Buddhism through societies for Buddhist studies in colleges. In particular, many belonged to the Correct Determination Society (Zhengding), which not only emphasized philosophical study but also small group discussions, role-play, and seminars, all of which were customized to the interests and needs of members. This structure is mirrored in the Incense Light adult classes, which Yü covers later in the book. The fourth chapter's focus lies in college Buddhist studies societies and Taiwan's "religious renaissance" (p. 71) since the 1980s. She clarifies the role of movements on college campuses in Taiwan centered around lay Buddhist studies societies from the 1960s to the 1980s in the formation of the dynamic religious milieu there, which is marked in particular by large numbers of nuns (seventy-five percent of monastics are female) with high education levels. To preface this, Yü sketches the historical circumstances that first prevented and then facilitated their organization (namely, the martial law imposed by the

Nationalist government from 1948 until 1987). She also devotes a lengthy portion of this chapter to sketching the individual histories of the people influential in the creation and development of these societies. To briefly summarize, Zhou Xuande (1899–1989) and Li Bingnan (1889–1986) both sought to redefine Buddhist studies in the public eye, yet took a Confucian approach to Buddhist teaching, encouraging lay learning but not necessarily monastic life. To this end, they initiated extracurricular lectures, workshops and retreats, and scholarships—all components of Taiwan’s modern lay Buddhist education. The monk Chanyun (1914–2009) supplemented a necessary practical component to the movement with his promotion of “consciously living” (p. 93). The direct connection between these figures and the Incense Light community can feel lost at times, although the historical context of college Buddhist studies societies and their impact on Incense Light’s curriculum and teaching method certainly seems significant.

In chapter 5, the longest by far, Yü covers the history of Buddhist seminaries in Taiwan, emphasizing their role in education as well as religion. Buddhism was in a precarious position vis-à-vis the state in mainland China during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, perhaps most strikingly represented by the steps taken in 1928 by the Nationalist government toward seizing all temple property to turn it into schools devoid of any religious component. Throughout these decades, though, lay members and monastics organized in efforts to shift the perception of Buddhism and its study among the religious and political elites into “a respectable intellectual endeavor” (p. 107). The early history of Buddhist seminaries arose out of this context. Through short vignettes, Yü describes the challenges faced by monks at Chinese seminaries, such as the excessive emphasis placed on Buddhist philosophy over practice and the ill treatment of monks. This sets the stage for her discussion of seminaries in Taiwan, which began in 1945 when the island was returned to China. The influx of mainland monks and explosive growth of seminaries resulted in the financial failure of many, in some cases owing to insufficient teaching materials or the lack of a unified plan. The Incense Light Buddhist Seminary’s extensive entrance examinations and curriculum stand in contrast to these earlier failures. Upon passing the exam, nuns engage in five years of study, ranging from general fields to specific ones based on their individual interests. They take courses in understanding, practice, dharma propagation, and daily living, the last of which comprises the bulk of the curriculum and focuses on various aspects of life as a nun—both minor (e.g., restrictions on eating, sexual activities, and money handling) and major (in this case, leadership).

The Incense Light nuns participate in a range of socially engaged activities. In addition to volunteer work, managing a publishing outfit and their own magazine, *Xianguan zhuangyan*, they offer a Buddhist information service and provide Buddhist adult classes, to which Yü devotes chapter 6. These classes, which comprise most of the community's economic base, are rooted in what Yü describes as a unique, integrative method of teaching characterized by active student participation, which she claims sets Incense Light apart from most other Buddhist classes in Taiwan. Class demographics mirror the make-up of monastics in Taiwan as a whole (seventy-five percent women), and nuns handle the administration, curriculum, and teaching. Yü covers in exceptional depth textbook contents, homework, and evaluation methods, also providing several examples of student essays. Worth noting with regard to textbooks is the emphasis on non-traditional language in the presentation of Buddhist concepts and ideas. That is, Buddhist adult classes aim to gear students toward a general Buddhist worldview, centered on making religion relevant for modern society and human relationships, rather than on the esoteric doctrines or treatises that other Buddhist seminaries had emphasized, as Yü describes in the previous chapter. The information Yü presents here is rather dense, with extensive excerpts from texts, exams, essays, and examples of "visceral" (p. 170) teaching methods intended to instill practical understanding. Nevertheless, the information is easy to follow and provides an invaluable glimpse into the classes themselves.

In her final chapter, Yü focuses on individual nuns and their biographies, specifically detailing their backgrounds and motivations to become nuns, as well as their perspectives on the Incense Light community. The interviews highlight the enormous range of duties and responsibilities the nuns hold, as well as the remarkably strong personalities that contribute to the dynamic character of—and sometimes conflict within—the community.

Yü's focus on the admittedly "quotidian details of training and service" (p. 1) may come off as overly tedious, a common drawback of detailed case studies. Still, Yü's study would have benefited from slightly more concise coverage of certain aspects, such as in the lengthy biographies. Her reliance on storytelling via biography offers interesting insights into individual lives, yet at times, it carries the perhaps unintentional consequence of distracting the reader from the broader themes at hand. This may reveal the limitations of modeling at least some aspects of her study on the *Lives of Nuns*. Furthermore, given that the title contains reference both to the Incense Light community and Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, one could argue that Yü should have devoted more space to a comparative perspective with other communities of Taiwanese nuns. These minor issues aside, however, Yü's enriching

study deserves high praise. It not only deepens our understanding of modern Taiwanese nuns but also expands our knowledge of Buddhist women in general.

*Becoming Buddhist, Becoming Buddhas, Liberating All Beings.* By Gregory G. Gibbs. Ryukoku University Translation Center: Kyoto, 2011. vii+194 pages. Paper \$24.95.

JOHN PARASKEVOPOULOS

Reverend Greg Gibbs is a unique voice in Shin Buddhism today. This very interesting and stimulating collection of short, but diverse, essays represents the fruit of his mature reflections over a forty-year period and clearly demonstrates the distinguished contribution he has made, as a thinker and practitioner, to a better understanding of this important Buddhist tradition. As it would be difficult to do justice to the book by commenting on all thirty-four essays, this review will focus instead on four in particular insofar as they represent Gibbs's best thinking on the three central concepts of Shin Buddhism: Amida Buddha, the realization of *shinjin*, and the practice of *nembutsu*. It is hoped that a treatment of these subjects will pave the way to a better understanding of other topics canvassed in this work, which, while certainly not uncontentious, clearly provide plenty of food for thought.

In "Amida Buddha is Not a Symbol," Gibbs offers a valuable corrective to the glut of misconceptions that plague contemporary discussions of the ultimate reality in Buddhism. He makes the very important point that Shin Buddhists perceive this "Fundamental Reality" through a host of forms such as Amida Buddha, the sound of the voiced *nembutsu*, or the depiction of *Namu Amida Butsu* on scrolls. However, these are not symbols in the sense of representing or recalling "something else by possessing analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought" (p. 93). In other words, they are living and organic embodiments of the formless reality that pervades all things as "non-substantially One" and through which that reality is expressed. For example, Gibbs rightly stresses that "Amida Buddha is not a symbol that we have calculated to represent the deep Truth about reality. Out of Life itself emerges the compassionate urge to liberate all suffering beings and this becomes Amida Buddha" (pp. 92–93). This is a critical point as it puts paid to the commonplace view that these are forms that are simply concocted by