

Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China. By Beata Grant. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. xi + 241 pages. Hardcover \$48.

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Beata Grant's *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* is a path-breaking study of Buddhist women writers during the Ming-Qing transition. Set out to "redress the imbalance in the study of Buddhist nuns in pre-modern China" (p. vii), this book tells the remarkable stories of seven women Chan masters of the Linji lineage who lived and taught in the seventeenth century through the nuns' self-representation. Based on their *yulu* or "discourse records" hidden in the privately printed Jiaxing edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon, Grant's book in nine chapters illuminates an aspect of Chinese Buddhism we knew very little about prior to her work's publication.

The book opens with an overview of the socio-historical context in which these seven nuns emerged as Chan masters. Grant argues that the chaos of the Ming-Qing transition actually opened up new possibilities for religious women in China. Sharply contrasting the image of nuns found in the late-imperial vernacular literature, which is generally anticlerical, the subjects of her book are highly educated women from literati families who entered religious life "not out of compulsion but out of choice" (p. 4). She attributes the rise to prominence of these women Chan teachers to three factors. First, for many Ming loyalists during the turbulent dynastic transition, entering religious life became not only acceptable, but even honorable (p. 6). The same applied to many elite women, especially those who were left widowed or childless. Second, the flourishing women's literary culture, especially in the Jiangnan area, had provided the female Chinese *samgha* with members of high literary and artistic talents. Furthermore, the expansion of printing and publishing during this period had enabled the formation of social and literary networks among women of the gentry class. Lastly, Grant relates the emergence of female Chan teachers in the seventeenth century to what Jiang Wu terms the "reinvention of Chan Buddhism."¹

This revival of the Linji school of Chan led by the monk Miyun Yuanwu (1566–1642) was underlined by a strong rhetoric of heroism and gender

¹ Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment in Dispute: The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

equality. In the attempt to revive what he called “the orthodox Linji school” that originated with the Tang master Linji Yixuan, Miyun Yuanwu stressed the vital importance of the official Dharma transmission between a Chan master and his disciples. This led to a spike in the number of Dharma heirs in Miyun Yuanwu’s line, which included the subjects of Grant’s study. All seven nuns belonged either to the lineage of Miyun Yuanwu or his twelve Dharma heirs. In seven chapters (chapters 3–9), Grant explores the careers of these nuns in meticulous detail. The life of Qiyuan Xinggang (1597–1654), whom Grant calls “the matriarch of seventeenth-century women Chan masters” (p. 37), is the focus of chapters 3 and 4. Two of her seven Dharma successors, Yikui Chaochen (1625–1679) and Yigong Chaoke (1615–1661) are discussed in chapter 5. The remaining chapters cover the lives of four Chan teachers: Jizong Xingche (1606–n.d.) in chapter 6, Baochi Jizong (n.d.) in chapter 7, Zukui Jifu (n.d.) in chapter 8, and Ziyong Chengru (n.d.) in chapter 9. Each chapter includes extensive translation and analysis of the nun’s own writings, together with biographical evidence drawn from available sources. This approach, compared to previous scholarship, enables us to understand the nuns’ lives and religious experiences through their own voices.

In chapter 2, which presents the image of nuns in the writings of seventeenth-century monks, the author highlights the arbitrary concept of *dazhangfu*, or great gentleman (p. 26). The Chan rhetoric of heroism and spiritual equality was based on the radical non-duality that transcends the distinction between men and women. The frequent use of this term in Chan literature beginning with Song Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) revealed an inherent tension in Buddhist gender discourse. On the one hand, the term was strongly gendered in the sense that nuns had to renounce their feminine qualities and weaknesses in order to become “great heroes” or “honorary men” and hence authorized Chan teachers. On the other hand, by invoking exemplary Buddhist women such as Moshan Liaoran (n.d.) and Miaozong (n.d.) in their self-representation, these late-imperial women Chan masters also demonstrated that although they might have transcended the male/female dualism, gender remained an important mark of their identity. Grant has convincingly argued that these nuns considered themselves belonging to a “dual lineage”—that of the pure and orthodox Linji lineage, and that of the female Buddhist lineage going back to Mahāprajāpatī, Moshan, and Miaozong (p. 30).

One aspect of the careers of these nuns that is not made very clear in Grant’s book concerns the overall impact they had on their tradition. In the

epilogue, she notes that as things went back to normal, and male literati returned to their studying for civil examinations in the eighteenth century, elite women were once again confined to their homes (p. 189). She also argues repeatedly that the gender equality discussed above was not merely a matter of rhetoric. Instead, it provided women Chan masters with an opportunity to “do what men do” (p. 186). These women teachers who were highly qualified took their role very seriously—they were actively engaged in teaching, the building of convents, and literary production to ensure each other’s legacy (p. 12). However, Grant does not elaborate as to how, then, these nuns influenced the institutional trajectory and gender discourse in late-imperial China.

Grant’s book is a substantial addition to the increasing body of literature on late-imperial women writers. This book will be accessible primarily to specialists in late-imperial Chinese literature, women in Chan Buddhism, and Buddhism in pre-modern China; but will unlikely appeal to a less specialized audience. However, this should not obscure Grant’s invaluable contribution to the study of Chan history as well as gender in late-imperial China. In order to fully appreciate her work, readers need to be reminded that although the Jiaxing canon is now available through the searchable CBETA database, it was not the case when she conducted her research. Therefore, Grant should also be credited for her painstaking archival search in discovering such a rare body of writings by pre-modern Buddhist women.

My only regret concerns the absence of Chinese characters in the body of the text or a glossary of Chinese terms. Though clearly not the author’s fault, it is extremely inconvenient if not frustrating for a book that refers to a tremendous number of names and places. In addition, a chart would have also been immensely helpful in visually presenting the complicated and often overlapping Linji lineage. Overall, this remarkable book deserves attention and appreciation from anyone interested in the study of women in Chinese Buddhism.