

Where Are the Nuns in Chinese Pure Land Buddhist History?¹

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ABSTRACT

This study is a survey and analysis of accounts preserved in premodern Chinese Buddhist hagiographic collectanea of nuns primarily identified as Pure Land. Dating from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, these accounts, while relatively scanty and often sparse in detail, provide important glimpses into the place of monastic women in a tradition known more for its emphasis on female domestic piety.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhist nuns, Chinese Pure Land, female monasticism, premodern Chinese nuns

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, Peng Xisu 彭希涑 (1761–1793), at the behest of his father, the famous Buddhist layman Peng Shaosheng 彭紹生 (1740–1796), compiled a comprehensive collection of biographical accounts of Buddhists known for their exemplary Pure Land devotion.² Entitled *Jingtu shengxian lu* 淨土聖賢錄 (*Records of Pure Land Saints and Sages*, preface dated 1783), it included numerous accounts of laymen and laywomen whose sincere devotion reputedly earned them rebirth in the Pure Land, as well as over 250 accounts of monks. There were, however, less than a dozen accounts of *bhikṣuṇīs* or nuns. In an editorial note, Peng Xisu speculates as to why he had so much trouble finding records of nuns:

As to the fact that there are only a few people that we still know about, could it be that there were records that once existed but have

1. I wish to express my gratitude to Charles Jones, who kindly read this article with particular care and whose comments and corrections were extremely helpful.

2. In this context, these accounts must be regarded as largely hagiographical.

all been scattered and lost? Or was it that most such women simply went along with the fashions of the day, and very few were able to restrain and discipline themselves?³

落落不過數人。意傳之者或逸歟。抑多浮沈隨俗。克自振厲者少歟。

Although Peng Xisu acknowledges that perhaps there were records of nuns that had simply been lost, he also seems to be persuaded that there were not that many nuns whose lives merited being remembered in the first place. His comments reflect the deeply rooted ambivalence, going back to the earliest days of Buddhist monasticism in India, about women who sought to live as ordained monastics rather than carry out their religious devotions within the home. Despite this ambivalence, there have always been many more nuns than the official records might lead one to believe, and some of their names (and occasionally biographies) can be found tucked away in a textual corner and largely forgotten. This study will focus on nuns from the Tang dynasty down to the late Qing dynasty who were identified primarily with the Pure Land tradition. Although their records are few and often offer little more than tantalizing glimpses into what were surely far more varied and interesting lives, a full appreciation of the richness and diversity of the Chinese Pure Land tradition demands that they be brought out of the margins.

PURE LAND NUNS IN TANG AND SONG DYNASTY COMPENDIA

In contrast to the many collections of biographies of monks (and during the Ming-Qing period, to laymen and laywomen), there are only two collections dedicated exclusively to nuns: the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (*Biographies of the Nuns*) compiled in the sixth century by the scholar-monk Baochang 寶唱 (466–518? CE)⁴ and the *Xu biqiuni zhuan* 續比丘尼傳 (*Sequel to the Biographies of the Nuns*) compiled in the early twentieth century by Zhenhua 震華 (1908–1947).⁵

The *Biqiuni zhuan* is comprised of sixty-five accounts of nuns who lived from the fourth to the sixth centuries, a handful of whom would later appear in Pure Land compendia, beginning with *Jingtu lun* 淨土

3. CBETA X78, no. 1549, p. 284a03–06.

4. CBETA T50, no. 2063. For a complete translation of this collection, see Kathryn Ann Tsai, trans., *Biographies of Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

5. CBETA CC1, no. 1. This collection has not yet been translated into English.

論 (*Treatise on the Pure Land*), the first collection of Pure Land hagiographies, compiled around 650 by the monk Jiakai 迦才 (620–680?). In his work, Jiakai features five laymen, five laywomen, six monks, and four nuns as exemplary Pure Land practitioners. The accounts of three of these nuns—Fasheng 法盛, Fa-sheng⁶ 法勝, and Guangjing 光靜—are copied almost verbatim from *Biqiuni zhuan*.⁷ The fourth nun, Ming the Elder (Da Ming 大明), may have been a contemporary of Jiakai: it would appear that it is in his compilation that her name first appears. The names of these four nuns will reappear again and again in later Pure Land compendia, their accounts redacted to fit specific editorial and ideological needs, even if this meant the erasure of what we might consider to be significant information about their lives. For example, Fasheng’s 法盛 biography appears to have been originally compiled by the scholar-official Zhang Bian 張辯 (412–454 or 472–511), who was a contemporary. Baochang then included this account in his *Biqiuni zhuan*, very possibly editing it to fit his didactic purposes. Jiakai’s account was based largely on Baochang’s, although he edited it to emphasize her exemplary Pure Land devotion and, in particular, her death.⁸ Jiakai’s account reads as follows:

The nun Fasheng, whose original surname was Nie, was a native of Qinghe [county in Hubei Province]. In the year 453, she became a nun at the Jianfu Temple [in present-day Nanjing]. Her Buddhist virtues were rich and abundant, and she often vowed to [attain] rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land. She addressed her fellow students Tanjing and Tan’ai, saying: “Now that I am fully established in the practice of the Way, my aspiration is directed to the Pure Land.” On the twenty-seventh day of the ninth month of the sixteenth year, after paying obeisance to the Buddha below the pagoda, she began to feel unwell. Her illness grew increasingly critical. Then, on the evening of the last day of the month, as she lay on her sickbed, in a vision she saw the Tathāgatha [Amitābha] appear in the heavens discussing the Vehicles with his two bodhisattva attendants (Guanshi yin and Dashizhi). Then suddenly they all soared over in a fragrant mist and came down to visit Fasheng, who was on the brink of death. A radiance filled the entire temple for all to see. When someone came to ask Fasheng about this bright light, she explained it all in detail. After she had finished speaking, she passed away. She was seventy-two years old.

6. Hyphenated to distinguish from the other Fasheng.

7. CBETA T1963, no. 47, p. 97a–100a.

8. CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 937c08–22.

The governor of Yuzhang, Zhang Bian, a native of Wu Commandery, had long held her in high regard and so wrote an account of her life.⁹

尼法盛。本姓聶。清河人也。以元嘉十年。於建福寺出家。道德隆盛。常願生安養。謂同學曇敬曇愛曰。吾立身行道。志在西方。十六年九月二十七日。塔下禮佛。因即遇疾。稍就綿篤。其月晦夕。初宵假寤。見如來乘虛而下。與二大士共論乘。俄與大眾。騰芳蹈藹。臨省盛疾。光明顯燭。一寺咸見。僉來問盛。此何光色。盛具說之。言訖尋絕。年七十二。豫章太守吳郡張辨。素所尊敬。為之傳述。

In his eagerness to offer what is primarily a rebirth testimony rather than a detailed biography, Jiakai omitted the entire first section of the *Biqiuni zhuan*. This section relates how after the fall of the Eastern Jin (which had ruled northern China from 266 to 420), Fasheng fled to the south, presumably with her family, and she took the tonsure at the Jianfu Convent 建福寺 in Nanjing in order to console herself over the pain of exile and the onset of old age.¹⁰ Jiakai does quote Baochang's reference to her "abundant virtue in the practice of the Way" (*daode longsheng* 道德隆盛) but does not include the observations that Fasheng was known and admired for her remarkable "talent, insight, and penetrating wisdom" (*caishi huijie* 才識慧解)¹¹ and her clear and lucid discourses on the fundamental principles of Buddhism.¹² Instead, he focuses primarily on Fasheng's virtue, her dedication to Pure Land practice, and the miracles that accompanied her pious death. In so doing, however, he omits small but important details about her life experience.

The second nun included in Jiakai's selection is Fa-sheng 法勝, about whom he offers a much shorter version of the longer account in *Biqiuni zhuan*:

The biography of the nun Fa-sheng from Southern Convent in Wu county relates how Fa-sheng left the household life [to become a nun] and, after living at the convent, went to study with a master at the capital to further her study of meditation, in the course of which she penetrated the riches of contemplation, and she investigated to the utmost the subtle and hidden fruits of the spiritual life. She instructed her disciples, accomplishing this without undue severity. During her meditative repose, she took the recitation of the Buddha's name as

9. CBETA T47, no. 1963, p. 98c02–10.

10. See CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 937c13.

11. CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 937c10.

12. CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 937c14.

her practice. At the end of her life, she was bathed in the Buddha's light, which had come to shine upon her, and then she died.¹³

吳縣南寺尼法勝傳云。法勝出家。住寺之後。乃往京師。進修禪律。該通定慧。探索幽隱。訓誘眷屬。不肅而成。於禪寂中念佛為業。終時蒙佛放光來照而卒。

In this case, although Jiakai includes a number of details regarding Fa-sheng's religious attainments, he omits the extended description found in Baochang's account of her early life, including her relationship with Madame Shen, a childless widow of a country magistrate killed in battle, whom Fa-sheng cared for assiduously as if she were her own mother: when Madame Shen fell ill, for example, she would go begging for medicine even in the most inclement weather.¹⁴

Jiakai's account of the nun Guangjing 光靜 (d. 442) summarizes some of the information found in *Biqiuni zhuan*, but it largely skips over his detailed description of the nun's dietary habits, which entailed not only abstaining from "sweets and fats" but in fact subsisting on nothing but pine resin for fifteen years before being told by a monk that in Buddhism, unlike Daoism, diet was not a central component of the religious life.¹⁵

The biography of the nun Guangjing from the Zhong Convent of Guangling states: Guangjing's [secular] surname was Hu, and she was a native of Wuxing. She left the household [to become a nun] when she was a child, and [already] when she was young had a lofty deportment and took up the practice of meditation and wisdom. She did not eat sweets or fats. Those who studied meditation with her numbered over one hundred. She dedicated herself to Buddha-recollection and purity. At the end, the air filled with unusual fragrance and marvelous signs, and then she died.¹⁶

廣陵中寺尼光靜傳云。光靜。姓胡。吳興人也。幼而出家。少有高行。恒習禪慧。不食甘肥。從學禪者。一百餘人。恒以念佛清淨為業。臨終盛得殊香異相遍滿空迎而卒。

Although the emphasis is still primarily on her auspicious death, Jiakai's account of the nun Ming the Elder, who is referred to here as

13. CBETA T47, no. 1963, p. 98c11–14.

14. CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 939a06–07.

15. See CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 939b04–07.

16. CBETA T47, no. 1963, p. 98c15–18. It is worth noting that the Buddha that was the object of Guanjing's practice was not Amitābha but rather Maitreya,

Mingyue the Elder (Da Mingyue 大明月 or Bright Moon the Elder) as opposed to her sister Xiao Mingyue 小明月 (Bright Moon the Younger) is relatively detailed, perhaps because, as mentioned earlier, he had direct access to information about her life. Jiakai's account reads as follows:

The nun Mingyue the Elder was a native of Pingyao, Jiazhou. When young she left home and took up residence at the Dutuo Convent. When she was about sixty, in the first year of the Zhenguan reign (627), she happened to hear a lecture by Master [Daozhuo] of the Xuanzhong Monastery¹⁷ on the *Wuliang shou jing* [Sutra of Immeasurable Life]. He instructed her in the practice of Buddha-recitation. Whenever she engaged in Buddha-recitation, she would first put on clean clothing and rinse out her mouth with water scented with aloeswood, after which she would light incense and, in a clean room, intone the [name of Amitābha]. She practiced in this way for three or so years without stopping. Even at the end of her life, this was her daily practice without any diminishing. The entire community witnessed a radiant light [coming from her quarters] and was greeted by the fragrance of aloeswood-scented water as her life came to an end. Her younger sister, Mingyue the Younger, also practiced Buddha-recitation with her elder sister, and her passing was also accompanied by these excellent signs, records of which are rarely found among either clergy or lay-people. Those who heard about this also took up Buddha-recitation.¹⁸

尼大明月者。介洲平遙人也。少出家住度脫寺。年將六十。去貞觀初。逢玄忠寺綽師講無量壽經。教念佛業。彼尼凡念佛時。先著淨衣。口含沈水香。殊燒香淨室念誦。三四年間。相續不斷。終時起居無減。舉眾皆觀光明。於光明內。聞有沈水香氣來迎。於即壽終。妹少明月。時亦同姊。念佛為業。無常時。亦感勝相(云云)難記道俗。聞者皆同念佛。

Of particular interest here is that Mingyue the Elder was introduced to Pure Land practice by the eminent Pure Land monk Daochuo 道綽

the buddha-to-be, and her practice consisted of “concentrating her thought” (*nian* 念) on Maitreya's Tuṣita Heaven rather than Amitābha's Pure Land, a fact that Jiakai conveniently omits.

17. The Xuanzhong Monastery 玄忠寺 in Jiaocheng county, Shanxi Province where Daozhuo taught and which is traditionally regarded as one of the cradles of Chinese Pure Land.

18. CBETA T47, no. 1963, p. 98c19–26.

(562–645).¹⁹ (It should be noted that although Mingyue the Elder apparently left home very early to become a nun, it is only when she was around sixty years old that she dedicated herself exclusively to Pure Land practice.) As we shall see, Mingyue the Elder’s name will appear again in subsequent Pure Land collections, although the account of her life provided by Jiakai will be further redacted and reduced—in one case, to a single line.

Of Jiakai’s five nuns, two reappear in the first true collection of Pure Land rebirth accounts, *Wangsheng xifang jintu ruiying zhuan* 往生西方淨土瑞應傳 (*Stories of Auspicious Responses Accompanying Birth in the Pure Land*), which was first compiled in 785 and expanded in the Five Dynasties period (907–960).²⁰ This collection includes twenty-one accounts of eminent monks, but only five of nuns. The accounts of two of these—Mingyue the Elder and Fa-sheng—are based on those found in Jiakai’s work. However, here they have been largely stripped of the few personal biographical details found in Jiakai’s accounts, which highlight the circumstances of their deaths. Fa-sheng’s account, for example, focuses on her end-of-life visions:

The nun Fa-sheng was a native of Wu County. She was advanced in her practice of seated meditation and [also] took Buddha-recitation as her practice. She would give instruction to both monastics and laity, urging them all to [aspire to] birth in the Pure Land. When she fell ill, she knew herself that she had not long to live. As she lay [on her sickbed] she had a vision of a monk whereupon she informed [her disciples], saying: “Since this illness will not get better, I must concentrate solely on Buddha-recitation. [I also] saw two other monks who, with shoulders bared, brought flowers and placed them by my

19. Although Daochuo’s name appears in Japanese texts as one of the early patriarchs of Pure Land, he is not listed as such in Chinese lineage records. See Charles B. Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 16.

20. Most scholars believe that there is no historical basis for the traditional attribution of the original collection to the Tang dynasty monks Wennian 文諗 and Shaokai 少康 (?–805), although at least one Japanese Pure Land scholar, Shinkō Mochizuki 望月信亨 (1869–1948), believes that this attribution may have been correct.

bed. My body was then suffused with radiance.” As soon as she finished speaking, she passed away.²¹

尼法勝吳縣人。進修禪寂。念佛為業。訓誘道俗。皆勸往生。得病自知不差。臥見一僧。報曰。此病不差。須專念佛。又見。二僧偏袒。執花立在床前。光明照我身。言訖而終。

Another nun whose name appears in this collection, and who will later appear in many other later ones as well, is Fazang 法藏. Her account reads as follows:

The Song dynasty nun Fazang lived at the Jianfu Monastery in Jinling. Her meditative attainments were both lofty and wide. She addressed her fellow student Tanjing, saying: “I have established myself and practiced the Way²² with the goal of being reborn in the Western Realm (the Pure Land).” She then suddenly fell ill, at which time she had a vision in which the Amitābha Buddha and all the sages came to inquire after her health. A bright light filled the entire convent, which everyone witnessed. She then passed away.²³

宋朝尼法藏金陵建福寺住。禪業高遠。謂同學曇敬。吾立身行道。志在西方。後忽染患。初見阿彌陀佛與諸聖眾省問法藏疾。光明照耀一寺。眾咸見。因爾而終也。

While there is a nun named Fazang in the *Biqiuni zhuan*, she is mentioned only briefly at the end of a much longer biography of another nun, and Baochang says only that she “was also widely recognized for her learning and her practice” (*yixuexing chiming* 亦以學行馳名).²⁴ The Jianfu Temple in Jinling with which she is associated, however, is the same as that of Fa-sheng 法盛, who, as we have seen, was known for both her intelligence and for her miraculous Pure Land death. In fact, the similarity of the account provided here of Fazang to earlier accounts of Fasheng suggests that they are in fact one and the same person and that the compiler has simply confused the two names.

Wangsheng xifang jintu ruiying zhuan also includes two early Tang dynasty nuns who do not appear to be found in earlier collections, but

21. CBETA T15, no. 2070, p. 106c10–13.

22. The phrase, “To establish oneself and practice the Way (*lishen xingdao* 立身行道)” is from the *Xiaojing* 孝經 (*Classic of Filial Piety*, ca. fourth century BCE), a popular Confucian text often used in basic classical and moral education.

23. CBETA T51, no. 2070, p. 106b24–28.

24. See CBETA T50, no. 2063, p. 944b15–16.

will reappear many times in later Pure Land compilations: Jingzhen 淨真 and Wuxing 悟性.

The nun Jingzhen lived at the Jishan Convent in Chang'an. In her monastic robes she would beg for food, and never in her life did she show any anger. She recited the *Diamond Sutra* eighteen thousand times and was particularly realized in [the practice of] *nianfo*. In the seventh month of the fifth year of Xianqing (650), she came down with an illness. She spoke to her disciples, saying: "Over the past five months, I have seen Amitābha Buddha ten times; and two times I have had a vision of the children playing among the jeweled lotus flowers of the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Moreover, there was a holy monk who five times spoke to me, saying that I would surely become a buddha. He also said that I would be reborn among the highest ranks." Then, seated in the lotus position, she [appeared to] pass away. However, during the night she regained consciousness again and spoke to her disciples, saying: "I have attained the rank of bodhisattva and have traversed the ten directions, making offerings to all of the buddhas." Having thus spoken, she passed away, and a bright light filled the convent.²⁵

尼淨真住長安積善寺。納衣乞食。一生無瞋。讀金剛經萬八千遍。專精念佛。顯慶五年七月染患。語弟子曰。五月內十度見阿彌陀佛。又兩度見極樂世界寶蓮華童子遊戲。又有聖僧。五度授記曰。我當作佛。又曰。吾得上品往生。跌跌而終。經宿却醒。語弟子曰。吾得菩薩位也。遍歷十方供養諸佛。言訖而終。光照於寺。

Again, we see that the larger context of Jingzhen's life as a nun is relegated to obscurity, although having her relate her multiple end-of-life visions in the first person does serve to make her testimonial account that much more effective. We see this same use of the first person in the account of Wuxing, who lived about a century after Jingzhen:

The nun Wuxing was a native of Luoyang. She encountered Ācārya [Fa]zhao from Hengzhou and took a vow to recite the Amitābha Buddha's name ten thousand times. In the sixth year of Dali (771), she went into the Tai mountains but suddenly fell [mortally] ill, [at which time] she heard the sound of music in the air. The nun said: "Having heard this [music I know that] I will [attain a] superior birth in the middle grade, where I will see all the people with whom I have practiced Buddha-recitation. The Western Realm is completely covered

25. CBETA T15, no. 2070, p. 106b29–c08.

with lotus flowers.” Then her body became suffused with a golden light. At the time [of her death] she was only twenty-four.²⁶

尼悟性洛陽人。於衡州遇照閣梨。發願念佛萬遍。大曆六年。入臺山。忽染患。聞空中音樂。尼曰。我聞。得中品上生。見同念佛人。西方盡有蓮華也。身金色光明。時年二十四矣。

Of special interest in Wuxing’s account is her connection with “Ācārya Yu,” another name for the eighth-century monk Fazhao 法照, traditionally regarded as the fourth patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism. Fazhao had studied with the third patriarch, Master Chengyuan 承遠 (712–802), the heart of whose religious practice was, according to Daniel Stevenson, a highly ritualized form of Buddha-recitation which entailed for ninety days straight “[circumambulating] an altar to Amitābha Buddha, while simultaneously intoning the Buddha’s name and visualizing his sublime form. Through this blend of ascetic rigor, sustained concentration, and invocation of Amitābha’s grace one sought to enter a state of meditative ecstasy (*samādhi*)....”²⁷ Fazhao was known for developing the so-called five-tempo Buddha-recitation (*wuhui nianfo* 五會念佛), which became very popular throughout the Mt. Wutai region of northern Shanxi as well as the capital of Chang’an. As Stevenson explains, “the five tempos of the practice were said to function in mystical sympathy with the exquisite music emitted by the flora and fauna of the Pure Land itself, thus making the method an effective antidote for the corrupt age of the decline of dharma (*mofa*).”²⁸ Although apparently Fazhao did not begin to teach this practice widely until the year 774, it is possible that Wuxing learned it directly from him. It may also be that the mountain she traveled to was Wutai rather than Mount Tai in Shandong Province, and that there she joined a congregation that had been established specifically for the purpose of engaging in Pure Land practice. In any case, she appears to have belonged to a larger community of Pure Land devotees, some of whom would, or so she predicts, join her in the Pure Land.

The Song dynasty (960–1127) saw a huge proliferation of hagiographic compendia devoted largely to descriptions of the auspicious

26. CBETA T15, no. 2070, p. 106c14–18.

27. Daniel Stevenson, “Visions of Mañjusrī on Mt. Wutai,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 207.

28. Stevenson, “Visions of Mañjusrī on Mt. Wutai,” 207.

deaths of Pure Land devotees; the number of nuns included in these collections, however, continue to be miniscule, especially in comparison to the number of monks, laymen, and laywomen. Moreover, most of the nuns who do appear are the same ones that we found in our pre-Song sources. For example, in *Jingtu wangsheng zhuan* 淨土往生傳 (*Biographies of Those Reborn in the Pure Land*) compiled by the monk Jiezhū 戒珠 (985–1077) and published in 1064, we find only two nuns: Fasheng 法盛, who we have already met, and Daoqiong 道瓊, who also appears in Baochang's *Biographies of Nuns*.²⁹ And in another Song dynasty collection, *Longshu cengguang jingtu wen* 龍舒增廣淨土文 (*Longshu's Pure Land Anthology*), dated 1160 and attributed to Buddhist layman and Pure Land devotee Wang Rixiu 王日休 (?–1173), we find only a single brief account of the Tang dynasty nun Jingzhen 靜真, which is drawn verbatim from Jiakai's earlier one.³⁰ Interestingly, however, this collection includes a cautionary tale attributed to the famous Song dynasty poet-official Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072). According to this account, when Ouyang was serving as governor of Yingzhou 潁州 in Anhui Province, he met an official courtesan whose breath smelled of lotus flowers. A monk who was able to know past lives informed Ouyang that this courtesan had been a nun in her previous life. She recited the *Lotus Sutra* for thirty years, but because of one stray thought had ended up being reborn as a courtesan. Curious about the truth of this, the courtesan was asked to recite the *Lotus Sutra*, which she was able to do faultlessly. Appended to this account is the following editorial comment, which again suggests that nuns had a harder time adhering to the necessary discipline than did monks:

This nun knew the gateway of Pure Land, and she should have been able to attain rebirth in the highest grade. However, she unwittingly regressed into [the body] of a courtesan. How can one not feel sorry! But knowing about this, one can use it to instruct others about the

29. For Fasheng's account, see CBETA T51, no. 2071, p. 112b08–23; For Daoyuan's account, see T51, no. 2071, p. 112b24–c08.

30. CBETA T47, 1970, pp. 267c28–268a04.

Dharma gate of the Pure Land: its power to liberate is great, but it is not that easy to attain an auspicious rebirth.³¹

使此尼知西方法門。則上品上生可也。不知而墜墮於妓。可不哀哉。以此知。能用西方法門教人者。其濟拔之功大矣。福報豈易量哉。

Finally, the *Jingtu lijiao zhi* 淨土立教志 (*Records for the Establishment of the Teaching Concerning the Pure Land*), compiled by the Song Buddhist historian Zhipan 志盤 (fl. 1258–1269), includes biographies for over one hundred monks and forty-three laywomen, but only seven nuns, five of whom we have met previously: Fasheng 法盛, Daoyuan 道爰, Fazang 法藏, Jingzhen 淨真, and Wuxing 悟性. This time, however, their accounts have been boiled down to just a handful of sentences. For example, Daoyuan's account reads:

Daoyuan was a native of Danyang. She first erected seven large [Buddha] images in various convents, which were extremely fine and beautiful. She also made a gold and bronze image of the Buddha of Infinite Life, which suddenly emitted a great radiance from between its brows, causing the ground to turn completely gold-colored. The image then spoke to Daoyuan, saying, "When you have abandoned this body, you will surely be born in my land." Then, seated in the lotus position in front of the image, she passed away.³²

道爰。丹陽人。先於諸寺造大像七軀。務極精麗。又冶金銅造無量壽佛像。忽於眉間 放大光明。地皆金色。像與爰記曰。汝舍此身必生我國。即於像前端坐而化。

Nor are the accounts any longer for Nengfeng 能奉 and Hui'an 慧安, the two new nuns who appear in this collection. Nengfeng's name, however, will reappear often in later compilations. Her account here reads as follows:

Nengfeng was a native of Qiantang [Hangzhou] who engaged exclusively in Pure Land practice. She often dreamed that the Buddha's radiance illuminated her body. Those who heard of this were all awakened by the nun's pious words. One day, without a trace of illness, she announced to her disciples, saying: "The time for my rebirth [in the Pure Land] has arrived." A while later, they heard her energetically reciting the Buddha's [name], and they hurried to see her. Then, sitting with palms together and facing West, she passed away. An

31. CBETA T47, no. 1970, p. 276a29–b03.

32. CBETA T49, no. 2035, p. 281c25–28.

unusual fragrance filled the room, and the sound of music could be heard coming from the West.³³

能奉。錢唐人。專修淨業。常夢佛光照身。或聞諸尼善言開發。一日無疾告其徒曰吾往生時至。少頃聞奉誦佛聲厲。奔往視之。則合掌面西坐逝矣。異香滿室樂音西邁。

Although Zhipan does refer to these women as eminent nuns (*gaoni* 高尼), the fact remains that their number is only slightly higher than the accounts he includes of four animals, including a fish and a parrot, who supposedly also attained rebirth in the Pure Land!³⁴

PURE LAND NUNS IN YUAN, MING, AND QING DYNASTY SOURCES

The 122 verses collected in *Zhu shangshanren yong* 諸上善人詠 (Various Poems about People of Supreme Goodness), compiled by the monk Daoyan 道衍 (Yao Guangxiao, 姚廣孝, 1335–1418) and printed in 1381, include three nuns, all of whom we have met earlier: Wuxing, Ming the Elder, and Jingzhen. These verses, which are accompanied by short biographical notes copied nearly verbatim from earlier Tang- and Song-dynasty accounts, each center on a distinctive event or characteristic associated with the nun in question. The poem about the nun Ming the Elder, for example, revolves around the fragrant aloeswood water described in her biographical account:

Clean clothing and solemn demeanor mean more than just adornment;
her mouth rinsed with aloeswood water, she recites Amitābha's name.
Her obligations in Jambudvīpa done, she transcends to the Lotus Realm;
where the fragrant breezes that welcome her are also to be marveled
at!³⁵

淨服嚴身飾外儀 口含沈水念阿彌
閻浮報盡超蓮土 香氣來迎也太奇

A handful of these same nuns appear also in a popular ten-fascicle text entitled *Linian Mituo daochang chanfa* 禮念彌陀道場懺法 (*Method of Repentance by Ceremoniously Invoking Amitābha at the Bodhimaṇḍa*) compiled by Wang Zicheng 王子成 (1278–1368) and printed in 1332. What is interesting is that here we find the names of four nuns we have already met—Jingzhen, Daoyuan, Wuxing, and Mingyue the

33. CBETA T49, no. 2035, p. 282a10–18.

34. CBETA T49, no. 2035, p. 273a02.

35. CBETA X78, no. 1547, p. 177b06–07.

Elder—incorporated into a ritual text. While short biographies excerpted from earlier accounts are appended to their names, what is significant is that each nun has come to be ritually associated with a different manifestation or sign of rebirth in the Pure Land, and each of their life stories is pared down to a single mnemonic four-character phrase:

- Jingzhen from Chang'an 長安淨真 Buddha-Prediction of Birth [in the Pure Land] 授記往生³⁶
 Daoyuan from Danyang 丹陽道瑗 Buddha-Manifestation Birth in the Pure Land 佛現往生³⁷
 Wuxing from Luoyang 洛陽悟 Middle-Grade Birth in the Pure Land 中品往生.³⁸
 Nun Mingyue the Elder 尼大明月 Smelling the Fragrance Birth in the Pure Land 聞香往生³⁹

Interestingly, the section in which the names of these nuns appear is addressed primarily to other nuns and thus can perhaps be regarded as offering the lineage of nuns to be remembered and emulated by later female monastics in the Pure Land tradition:

Today the great assembly of this *bodhimaṇḍa* who share the same practice [can see] from the above [examples of] the *bhikṣuṇī* sangha who have attained rebirth. Now those who are [also] *bhikṣuṇī* should make the following vow: “If I always honor the three refuges, completely eradicate the five hindrances, and also am able to meditate on this with utmost sincerity, then it will not be long before I see the Buddha and, when this karmic body is done with, I will surely attain rebirth in the Pure Land. With a mind of resolve, I make a full prostration, and take refuge in the Great Compassionate Father [Amitābha].”⁴⁰

今日道場同業大眾。如上所說。尼眾往生。今為尼者。當發願云。常奉三歸。恒除五障。又能精心觀想。不久見佛。此報身盡。必定往生。相與志心。五體投地。歸依世間大慈悲父。

While the small number of nuns for whom we have recorded accounts does not change much as we move into the Ming period, we do see a greater awareness of the discrepancy between the number of

36. CBETA X74, no. 1467, p. 94a04.

37. CBETA X74, no. 1467, p. 94a10.

38. CBETA X74, no. 1467, p. 94a15.

39. CBETA X74, no. 1467, p. 94a18.

40. CBETA X74, no. 1467, p. 94a20–23.

records of male and female monastics as well as efforts to rationalize it. Perhaps the most influential figure in this respect is the late Ming master Yunqi Zhuhong 云栖祿宏 (1535–1615), generally acknowledged to be one of the most influential advocates of Pure Land practice and, in fact, regarded as its eighth patriarch. Among his many writings, we can find listings of pious women, both lay and monastic, to which he appends editorial notes that shed important light on his views of female religious practice. In an editorial note appended to his *Wangsheng ji* 往生集 (*Collection of [Pure Land] Rebirths*), a collection of over thirty accounts of laywomen, Zhuhong states that while there are indeed no women in the Pure Land, it was possible for women to be reborn there if they became “*da zhangfu*” or great gentleman,⁴¹ a term he appears to use to refer to both women and men who have transcended their ordinary gender identities: “In this pure realm,” he writes, “if one looks for men’s forms one will not find them, much less those of women!” 清淨界中。覓男相尚不可得。況女相乎。⁴² Nevertheless, Zhuhong also believed that it was particularly difficult for women to advance spiritually, and points to three faults to which he felt they were particularly subject:

The first is that they do not treat their in-laws as they would their own parents. The second is that they do not treat their servants and maids as they would their own sons and grandsons. The third is that although they know how to give donations, they do not know how to put an end to their lustful minds; although they know how to envy the male body, they do not know how to correct their female habits; and although they know how to scurry off to temples in order pay

41. For more on the use of this term in Chinese Chan Buddhist texts, see Miriam Levering, “Lin-chi Chan and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Jose Ignacio Cabezon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137–156; and Beata Grant, “*Da Zhangfu*: The Rhetoric of Female Heroism in Seventeenth-Century Buddhist Writings,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 10, no. 2 (2008): 177–211.

42. CBETA T51, no. 2072, p. 146b17–18.

respect to monks, they do not know how to turn inwards seeking themselves.⁴³

雖然女更有三病焉。孝翁姑不如其父母一也。御婢僕不如其子孫二也。知布施而不知息其貪心。知慕男身。而不知革其女習。知奔走寺宇恭事沙門。而不知反求諸己三也。

While Zhuhong by no means believed that these faults were insuperable, one cannot avoid noting that correcting them would mean adhering closely to traditional (Confucian as well as Buddhist) standards of female behavior, including treating their servants kindly and pursuing their inner cultivation at home rather than “scurrying off to temples.” It is important to note, however, that Zhuhong’s comments about women’s religious potential refer primarily to laywomen. In fact, while he includes in his compilation biographical accounts of almost one hundred monks from earliest times down to the early Ming known for their Pure Land piety, he makes relatively brief mention of only five nuns from the Tang-Song period, again all of whom we have met before: Ming the Elder, Jingzhen and Wuxing, Nengfeng, and Fazang. His concluding remarks to his short section on nuns betray an anxiety about the traditional connection between the ordination of nuns and the decline of the Dharma, the final days (*mofa* 末法) of which he and many contemporaries believed had already begun.⁴⁴ Zhuhong writes:

When his stepmother left the household [to become a nun], the Buddha lamented that because of it, the correct Dharma would be diminished. [But] if women who left the household were all like the above five persons, then would not the correct Dharma have flourished widely? However, the trend of the times is that they are unable to [live up to these standards], which shows that the Buddha’s prophecy was not mistaken. Alas, in recent times, there are not even

43. CBETA T51, no. 2072, p. 146b15–23.

44. See for example, Ute Huesken, “Gender and Early Buddhist Monasticism,” in *Saddharmāmṛtam. Festschrift für Jens-Uwe Hartmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Oliver von Criegern, Gudrun Melzer, and Johannes Schneider (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 2018), 215–230.

many men able to truly take ordination; how much less women! I feel [deeply] about this.⁴⁵

佛以姨母出家。嘆正法由此而滅。使女人出家者皆如上五人。正法其彌昌乎。而勢所不能。佛之懸記非過矣。噫真正出家之男子。邇來尚不多得。而況女眾歟。吾於是乎有感。

Zhuhong does seem to be suggesting here that the sad state of the Dharma might indeed be attributable, as predicted by the Buddha, to the inability of female monastics to live up to its standards.⁴⁶ Although Zhuhong hastens to add that men also faced similar challenges, he clearly felt that it was much more difficult for women, which is why those who were determined to become nuns should at the very least remain within the confines of their convents, just as their lay sisters should remain within the confines of their homes. In *Shami biqiuni jielu yao* 沙彌尼比丘尼戒錄要, a compendium of rules and regulations for nuns and novices edited by Zhuhong, among the long list of “must nots” (*bude* 不得) are proscriptions against traveling long distances in order to engage in fundraising, and going on pilgrimage. Indeed, as Zhuhong writes in an editorial comment: “When it comes to proper conduct (lit. preserving oneself, that is, one’s integrity or one’s chastity), female monastics must be even more careful than laywomen” (尼僧守身。當比在家女人加倍謹慎).⁴⁷

However, there was one who completely fit the bill as a model of a woman who pursued her practice as a nun within the domestic sphere, and that woman was Zhuhong’s second wife: Madame Tang 湯氏, who after her husband left her to become a monk shortly after their marriage (she was only nineteen at the time) returned home and devoted herself to religious practice together with her mother, and then, after her mother’s death, took the tonsure herself and became the abbess of a highly regarded convent named, significantly, Xiaoyi (Filiality and Righteousness).⁴⁸ Zhuhong drew up the rules for this convent and

45. CBETA T51, no. 2072, p. 143c27–a01.

46. Zhuhong’s comments were later reiterated by Pure Land writers such as Zhou Mengyan 周夢顏 (1656–1739), who in his influential work *Xigui zhizhi* 西歸直指 (*Directions to the Western [Pure Land]*), approvingly cites Zhuhong’s comment. See X62, no 1173, p, 123b08–10.

47. CBETA. J32, no. B277, p. 595c08–10.

48. For a comprehensive study of this nunnery, see Jennifer Eichman, “Zhuhong’s Communal Rules for the Late Ming Nunnery Filiality and

wrote a biographical account of Madame Tang from which later compilers would often draw.⁴⁹

One of the first of these was the extensive fourteen-fascicle collection entitled *Rulai xiang* 如來香 (*Fragrance of the Thus-Come*) compiled by Zhuhong's lay disciple, Tang Shi 唐時 (style name Yizhi 宜之, fl. mid-seventeenth century). In the fifth fascicle of this compilation, we find biographies of Pure Land devotees, including twenty-eight monks, over thirty laymen, sixty-one laywomen, and a total of nine nuns. These nuns include seven familiar names from the pre-Ming period—Fasheng, Daoyuan, Fazang, Ming the Elder, Jingzhen, Wuxing, and Nengfeng. The other two nuns are Zhuhong's wife, Zhujin, and one of her disciples, the novice-nun Guangjue 廣覺, about whom Zhuhong had also written. Tang's accounts, based largely on Zhuhong's, are both concise and informative. Zhujin's account reads as follows:

The *bhikṣuṇī* Zhujin of the Ming was from Wulin and had the style name of Taisu; her secular surname was Tang; her father was Master [Tang] Xiaojiang and her mother was Madame Zhu. When she was fourteen years old, she undertook a three-year vegetarian fast on behalf of her mother. At the age of eighteen she became the second wife of the scholar Master Shen [Zhuhong's secular name] from Lianchi. A little over a year later, when he gave her up in order to enter the religious life, Madame Tang conducted herself in a firm and pure manner, serving her father's concubine-mother and raising an adopted son. Later she too took the tonsure and became a nun. Her home was converted to a nunnery, the name of which was Xiaoyi.

At first, she received guidance from the monk Guangzhong Xingtian, with whom she took the *upāsikā* ordination, and was given the Dharma name of Zhujin. Then at the age of forty-seven, she took full ordination. Because of her reputation, she came to be widely known as a master. She then rented a house and [devoted herself] to burning incense, and by adhering to pure dharmas and self-discipline, she was greatly admired by other women. When she was fifty-nine years old, the nunnery was completed, and a stele inscription was inscribed by Grand Military Master Song. When she was sixty-seven, she fell ill and after two months was unable to swallow even one grain of rice. [One day] she suddenly spoke to the others, saying:

Righteousness Unobstructed," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 21, no. 2 (2019): 224–275.

49. "Yanzhu Taisu shi 庵主太素師," in *Yunqi Fahui* 雲棲法彙 J33, no. B277, p. 192a12–b10.

“Help me up [so that] I can perform the ten invocations that will lead one to rebirth in the Pure Land.”⁵⁰ Then, sitting erect and reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha, she passed away. The date was the thirteenth day of the eighth month of the Jiayin year of Wanli reign (1614). Her entire life was one of disciplined conduct and purity. The fruit of her gifts of faith were meticulous and clear, and there was nothing in which she was negligent. The account of her life can serve as a model for all female monastics!⁵¹

明祿錦比丘尼。字太素。武林人。俗姓湯氏。父小江公。母朱氏。年十四為母持齋三載。十八適庠生蓮池沈公為繼室。逾年公奪愛出家。湯氏清修自矢。事庶姑而撫嗣子。後亦剃染為尼。化家為庵。名曰孝義。初詣關中性天和尚。授優婆夷戒。法名祿錦。至四十七出家。受具足戒。亦以為名。而遙師焉。齋舍焚修。以白法自持。為女流宗仰。五十九而菴成。大司馬宋公為文勒石。六十七而邁疾。彌月粒米不入口。忽云經稱十念往生。亟扶我起。起則正坐念佛而逝。時萬曆甲寅八月十三日也。平生戒行潔白。信施因果明慎。絲毫無所苟。其實行可為尼僧楷式云。

Tang’s account of the novice-nun Guangjue, the most well-known of Zhujin’s twenty-one female disciples, is also based largely on Zhuhong’s. From it we learn that she was born to a highly respected family, and by the age of twelve had already become a vegetarian and begun to devote herself to the study of the Buddhist sutras and the worship of the Buddha. Apparently, her parents did not oppose her decision to take the tonsure at the Xiaoyi Convent when she was eighteen years old. Although there is no explicit mention of this, it may be that Guangjue suffered from ill health, which may have affected her marriage prospects. In any case, when she was only thirty-three, she fell ill, and not long after, seated in the lotus position and softly reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha, peacefully passed away.⁵²

A collection entitled *Jingtu quanshu* 淨土全書 (*The Complete Works of Pure Land*, 1664), compiled by the Pure Land devotee Yu Xingmin 俞行敏, includes brief accounts of five of the usual suspects: Ming the Elder, Jingzhen, Wuxing, Nengfeng, and Fazang. However, he also adds accounts of two nuns, Wuwei 無為 and Yuelang 月朗, that are interesting

50. This refers to the belief that, thanks to the Buddha’s great compassion, even the most sinful person can achieve rebirth in the Pure Land if on their deathbed they repent and utter ten invocations of the Buddha’s name.

51. CBETA D52, no. 8951, pp. 464b06–465a07.

52. CBETA D 52, no. 8951, p. 465b1–8.

in that they do not seem to be meant to serve purely as exemplary models but rather offer the sort of distinctive detail often missing in many such texts. Wuwei, for example, is described not only as a devout Pure Land practitioner, but also a meditation master, as well as a healer and a poet:

Her secular family name was Lai 來, and she was from Xiaoshan 蕭山 [in Zhejiang Province]. When young she vowed to remain unmarried, and keeping to a vegetarian diet, she engaged in the practice of recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha (*nianfo* 念佛). When she was twenty years old, she shaved her head and built herself a rustic hut where she devoted herself to her Pure Land devotions. When she was thirty years old, she set out to visit various masters and to deepen her religious understanding. Along the way, she would care for the hungry and destitute. During the Jiajing period [1522–1566], the court was afflicted by a epidemic, and hearing of [Wuwei] she was summoned to the court, where she was bestowed with the title of Meditation Master Wuwei Xin 無為心禪師. She was then sent back to her old residence, where she lived to the end of her days. [At one point] a divine monk⁵³ came asking for lodging, but Wuwei turned him away three times. However, the divine monk forced his way in and settled down on the meditation bench. When she woke up [the next day] and he was nowhere to be seen, she knew he had been a divine monk. She then rose and penned this *gāthā*:

After sixty-four years of working and toiling,
This morning, I will return to the Pure Land.
I've realized the *samādhi* of divine wisdom;
The bright moon and clear breeze unchanged.

After her death and cremation, relics were found among her ashes, and a stupa was built [to house them] on Mount Kuan.⁵⁴

明蕭山來氏女。幼誓不嫁。蔬食念佛。年二十薙髮結茆。專修淨業。三十游方參學。凡所歷處。有病苦者。隨物取與煎湯。服之即愈。嘉靖間。宮中時疫。風聞于朝。召赴有驗。賜無為心禪師之號。送歸故廬。將終日。有神僧投宿。無為却之再三。神僧勸誡而進。權宿禪牀。睡醒

53. A term often used to refer to monks with miraculous powers. Here, the monk appears to have been a spirit-messenger whose coming presaged Wuwei's death and subsequent rebirth in the Pure Land.

54. CBETA X62, no. 1176, p. 180a07–14. Mount Kuan is in Shanxi Province.

不見。知是神僧。便起坐偈云。六十四年活計。今朝撒手歸西。得個菩提三昧。依然明月清風。即逝茶毗。一團舍利。塔于冠山。

Yuelang's account is much shorter and in fact makes no mention of her Pure Land practice. It does, however, provide a tantalizing glimpse into the lengths to which a woman might go when she was intent on pursuing her religious goals:

The nun Yuelang of the Great Qing [dynasty] was from an established family of Songjiang, surnamed Wu. Her parents wanted to arrange a marriage for her, but she forcefully objected and would not go along with it. When she was seventeen years old, she encountered a nun from the Qianjiang Convent who was begging for alms to feed the clergy, and she pleaded to let her become a nun. In the spring of the following year, she went with her grandmother and other relatives on pilgrimage to Tianzhu [in Hangzhou]. They finally arrived at the Qianjiang Convent; she planted her feet down and made known her decision not to return home. Her relatives tried to persuade her to return, but she had made up her mind and would not be moved, and so they knew there was nothing they could do.⁵⁵

大清尼月朗。松江世族。吳氏女。父母欲為擇配。力阻弗擇。年十七遇杭州尼千江。化緣齋僧。懇求出家。次年春。隨祖母諸眷屬。天竺進香。乘便。竟至千江庵。住足。示無歸意。眷屬咸往勸之歸。決志不。眾知不可。

Beginning in the late Ming and continuing into the early Qing, the Chan school underwent an active revival, one of the side effects of which was the growing visibility of ordained nuns. Many of these Chan nuns engaged in the activities that Zhuhong warned against, including leaving the convent not only to go on pilgrimage but also to seek instruction from different teachers. Some also came to be officially recognized as Chan masters themselves and could often be seen in public, raising funds for their convents and delivering Dharma talks attended by laymen and laywomen from outside the convent. There were many who greatly respected these women, including well-known scholar-officials who attended their Dharma talks and wrote prefaces for their discourse record collection, which they then helped to get printed and circulated.⁵⁶ However, there were others who harbored

55. CBETA X62, no. 1176, p. 180a16–19.

56. For more on these nuns, see Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Buddhist Masters of Seventeenth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

deep misgivings about such visibly active female religiosity. One such person was the poet and scholar-official Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664), who reserved his greatest respect and admiration for nuns who devoted all of their energies to chanting the name of Amitābha in the hopes of rebirth in the Pure Land.

[They] flee the dust of the marketplace and distance themselves from vulgar people, do not broadcast their travels to visit [religious teachers], and do not seek a place in the lineage of an eminent monk. [Rather,] with every single sound of the Buddha's name, ten thoughts are devoted to [ensuring that she appears] on the registered list for rebirth [in the Pure Land].⁵⁷

卻避市塵遠離俗姓,不唱參訪之緣,不挂大僧之籍,一聲佛號十念往生族表。

These lines appear in a stupa-inscription that Qian Qianyi wrote for Chaoyin 潮音 (1582–1655). Before becoming a nun, Chaoyin had been married to a local scholar-official to whom she had borne two sons before he suffered an untimely death. Shortly afterwards, her eldest son left home to become a monk, but he also died prematurely. Overwhelmed with grief, she and her youngest son themselves decided to enter the religious life. Chaoyin soon gained a reputation for her dedicated practice of Buddha-recitation, the sounds of which, we are told, could be heard issuing from her room both day and night. Most significantly, she demonstrated the extent of her religious attainments by being able to predict the precise time of her death, a peaceful passing witnessed by a large group of onlookers.

This view of an ideal female religiosity, whether lay or monastic, performed privately within the domestic realm came to be exemplified by Peng Shaosheng's *Shannü ren zhuan* 善女人傳 (*Biographies of Pious Women*), which was comprised primarily of accounts of laywomen from earliest times down to Peng's own day. Several years later, Peng Shaosheng edited and reprinted *Chongding Xifang gongju* 重訂西方公據 (*The Revised Guidelines to the Western Paradise*, preface dated 1792), a collection of Pure Land related texts that included works in both verse

57. Qian Qianyi, "Zuotuo biqiuni Chaoyin taming, 坐脫比丘尼潮音塔銘," in *Muzhai youxueji bu* 牧齋有學集補 (Collected Further Scholarship from Shepherd's Studio), *Qian Muzhai quanji* 錢牧齋全集, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2003), 508, quoted in *Xu biqiuni zhuan*, CBETA CC 1, n1, pp. 204a09–205a13.

and prose, as well as a small section of biographical accounts.⁵⁸ Again, only a very few nuns are included, although Peng seems inclined to believe that this absence was because they had been lost rather than that they had never existed at all.

As I was editing the *Record of Pure Land Saints and Sages*, I could only find eleven nuns from the Liu-Song up until the Ming. As for nuns from our Wu region whose rebirth in the Pure Land has been verified, I was able to locate four people from the last decade or so. There must have been many more who have disappeared and been forgotten. What a pity!⁵⁹

余輯淨土聖賢錄。錄比丘尼。自劉宋迄明。不過十一人。而吾吳十餘年來。其往生有據者。乃得四人焉。則其他湮沒無聞者蓋多矣。惜哉。

The four nuns from Wu (another name for southeastern China, in particular Jiangsu and Zhejiang) were Qisong Benyin 岐松本印, Shengke Lüzong 聖可律宗, Yuecheng Suiqin 越成遂欽, and Foqi Jinlian 佛琦見琳. Their accounts, although still short, are more individualized than many earlier accounts, and it may well be that Peng had firsthand information from which to draw. Although the emphasis in these accounts is still on their “good deaths,” proof of which is provided by visions and unexplained fragrances, we are also provided with a rather less formulaic glimpse of their lives. Interestingly, unlike Chaoyin, none of these four women entered the religious life as widows. Foqi Jinlian 佛琦見琳 (1736–1791), for example, even as a young girl was adamant that she did not wish to marry, and was eventually allowed to take the tonsure at the Yuhua Convent 雨華菴 in Suzhou. She later went to the Chongfu Convent 崇佛菴, also in Suzhou, where she was ordained by a nun named Daojian 道堅, who she eventually succeeded as abbess. Foqi appears to have been an influential teacher, who, among other activities, presided over several Buddha-recollection retreats each year. She also engaged in activities expressly prohibited in Zhuhong’s regulations for

58. The compiler of the original Song-dynasty collection of Pure Land-related texts is unknown, although it has been attributed by some to none other than Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036–1101). It had been largely lost with only portions of one chapter still extant when Peng edited, revised, and added an additional chapter to it. Apart from earlier texts (including selections from Yongming Yanshou’s writings on dual cultivation of Chan and Pure Land), Peng also included accounts of Pure Land devotees from his own time.

59. CBETA X62, no. 1180, p. 0303b04–06.

the Xiaoyi convent, including traveling and engaging in active fundraising: by means of the latter, for example, she was able to garner enough funds for large sandalwood statues of the Three Sages of the Western Pure Land (Amitābha Buddha and his two attendant bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara or Guanyin and Mahāsthāmaprāpta or Dashizhi). Foqi also left several female disciples, including Zujing Huitong 祖淨慧通, who assumed leadership of the Chongfu Convent after the death of her teacher and acquired a wide reputation for her impeccable monastic discipline; and Zuji 祖潔 (d. 1808), who was known for engaging in non-stop Buddha-recitation.

Several decades after the Pengs, Hangzhou native and Buddhist layman Hu Ting 胡珽 (1822–1861) compiled *A Continuation of Records of Pure Land Saints and Sages* (*Jingtu shengxian lu xubian* 淨土聖賢錄續編), an updated version of Peng Xisu's original collection of biographies. He included an additional 160 accounts, primarily of monks, laymen, and laywomen, but also eleven contemporary or near-contemporary nuns. A conscientious historian—he refers to himself as the Historian of the Pure Land—he dutifully records the sources for his accounts. Four of his nun's accounts are based on Peng Shaosheng's *Sifang Gongju*: Benyin, Daoqian, Lüzong, and Foqi. Although he does not appear to have made any significant modifications to the original accounts apart from shortening them, he does add his own editorial note to Foqi's account in which he comments on the fact that Foqi traveled to various famous mountains on pilgrimage and at various monasteries “made offerings to the Buddha and fed the monks.”

The Historian of the Pure Land says: Feeding monks to gain merit is an activity often engaged in by laypersons. Nowadays there are many cases of nuns doing this as well. So, how can it be said that [nuns] are unable to overcome their miserly greed? Therefore, if women can cultivate merit [in this way], those who call themselves *śramaṇas* (monks) should make even greater efforts to cultivate their virtue in this way. But they only think about how others [should] support

them, and do not consider their own obligations. Alas, they should also be like [these nuns]!⁶⁰

西史氏曰。飯僧作福。在家人恒有之。今出家女眾。亦屢見焉。謂非能破慳貪者乎。雖然。女眾可以修福。而號為沙門者。愈當精進。若夫但圖人之供養。而不知己之承事。嗚呼。其亦可以已矣。

Several of Hu Ting's accounts of nuns are based on the once popular (but now rare) one-fascicle collection entitled *Ranxiang ji* 染香集 (*Incense-Burning Collection*) compiled by the monk Wuling 悟靈 (d. 1828).⁶¹ Many of these accounts continue to focus on miraculous deaths following lives of impeccable virtue and single-minded religious practice. Langran 朗然 (d. 1808), for example, is said to have vowed never to marry when as a teenager she witnessed the suffering of her aunt giving birth. She begged her father and mother to allow her to leave home and went to the Jingchi Nunnery 淨池庵, where she devoted herself single-mindedly to the practice of *nianfo*, and just before her death at the age of seventy-one, was rewarded with a vision of herself seated on a lotus flower floating on the jeweled ponds of the Pure Land.⁶² Miaocheng 妙成 (d. 1814) is said to have been a widow who worked hard to support her impoverished in-laws by her embroidery. Once her filial duties were no longer needed, she was ordained at the Guangyan Nunnery 廣嚴庵 and soon attracted a sizeable following, thanks to her reputation for a strict observance of discipline and the practice of Buddha-recitation. She too was granted visions assuring her of her rebirth in the Pure Land before passing away at the age of forty-seven.

Perhaps the most interesting of these nuns is Daoqian, who although she is included as an example of Pure Land devotion, was actually a Dharma heir of Chan master Baolin Yuanzhen 寶林達珍 (1731–1790), and the first half of her account is devoted to a description of how she came to achieve this status.⁶³ In the second half, however, we are told how, after receiving Dharma transmission, Daoqian took up residence in a dilapidated grass hut on the banks of South Lake (Nanhu) in Zhejiang Province. There she dedicated herself primarily to the study and recitation of the *Avatamsaka* and *Perfection of Wisdom*

60. CBETA X78, no. 1550, p. 325a17–20.

61. There appear to be only a few extant editions of this collection, although it is often cited.

62. CBETA X78, no. 1550, p. 325b02–05.

63. For this account, see CBETA X78, no. 1550, p. 325b20–c17.

sutras. Over time, she began to attract many followers, some of whom donated enough to allow her to add a couple of halls to her retreat. Up until this point, there is little or no mention of anything related to Pure Land, whether in terms of texts or practices. But then we are told that in the course of expanding her small hermitage, she built a Buddha-recitation hall, from which for forty years, “day and night the sound of the fish-drum being struck went on without pause.” In the winter of 1820, we are told, she felt slightly unwell, and on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, she announced to her followers that she would be leaving them very early the following morning. When the time came, Daoqian Shichan followed the precedent set by many Chan masters and composed a *gāthā*. Then, after requesting all those gathered around her sickbed to recite the name of Amitābha Buddha, she passed away accompanied by auspicious signs. In his comment on Daoqian’s biographical account, Hu Ting remarks on the rarity of finding a woman engaging in this dual practice of Pure Land and Chan:

The Historian of the Pure Land says: From ancient times down to the present, Chan and Pure Land have been cultivated in tandem. However, to see a member of the female sangha doing so is quite unusual. Her ability to live without any concern for her own comfort and her zealous investigation of the Way are all the “Marks of a Great Person.”⁶⁴ If this was not truly the case, how could she have been able to strive to do them?⁶⁵

西史氏曰。自古及今。禪淨雙修。而出自女眾者。蓋鮮矣。至其居不求安。殷勤辦道。宛具大人之相。苟非真實了當。其可勉強為之耶。

Hu Ting appears to be surprised by her ability to suffer great hardship and her dedication to the investigation of the Way, presumably requiring more determination than women might usually be expected to muster. At the end of his section on nuns, Hu Ting appends the following concluding remarks:

There are those who say that because women are subject to the three submissions (to father, husband, and son) and the five obstructions, they are unable to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. They do

64. The term “marks of the great person” (Skt. *mahā-puruṣa-lakṣaṇa*) usually refers to the thirty characteristics of the Buddha, which include, among other things, a large, lionlike torso, very blue eyes, and concealed (male) sexual organs. Here it seems to refer more generally to Daoqian’s great virtues.

65. CBETA X78, no. 1550, p. 0325c13–15.

not understand that the bodies of all sentient beings are created by karma, and that is due to [the difference between a] light and a heavy karma that we have the division between men and women. Now, if a person with a female body resolves to leave the household, then her karma from a previous life will be dissolved, and because of this she will be able to enter the Land of Purity and Peace [the Pure Land]. Once enlightened wisdom has come to fruition, then it will no longer be possible to acquire either a female body or a male body. Where then will there be such submissions or obstacles?⁶⁶

總論曰。或謂女人有三隔五礙。何以得生淨土。是不知眾生之身。皆由業造。視業輕重而分男女。今以女身而決志出家。斯其宿業決定消除。以是而登清泰之鄉。成菩提之果。而女身男身。了不可得。復何有所隔礙哉。

Hu Ting does not go so far as to say that the gendered differences are “empty”—he still believes in karmic causation—but he seems to believe that such differences can be transcended by means of sincere religious practice.

A couple of decades later, we find another compiler again musing over the relative absence of the voices of Pure Land nuns in the available records:

Of the four categories of Buddhist followers, we found ourselves lacking only writings by nuns. The gentle beauties of heaven and earth are not judged according to which category they belong. How much more so is this true of the different categories [of Buddhist followers]? Moreover, those who belong to the same category should be the ones to inspire others from the same category. How could it be that [those in the category of nuns] teach only by way of example and not by means of words?⁶⁷

往常與玉尺家居。考訂淨土文字。四眾中獨少尼之著作。竊謂天地清淑之氣。必不以類而有所輕重於其間。況方以類聚。則同類之身。必引同類。豈但有身教而無言教者乎。

This comment was made by the Buddhist layman Jiang Yuanliang 蔣元亮, a close associate of the late Qing monk Miaokong 妙空 (1826–1880) who, as part of a general effort on the part of many devout Buddhists, had set up a printing press with the aim of printing and reprinting

66. CBETA X78, no. 1550, p. 326a08–12.

67. “Lianghai ni zhuan gao 量海尼傳稿,” *Xiuxi wenjian lu* 修西聞見錄, CBETA 78, no. 1552, p. 398c17–20.

Buddhist texts in the aftermath of the disastrous Taiping Rebellion.⁶⁸ One of the volumes Miaokong and Jiang planned to publish was a collection of Pure Land poems composed by representatives of each of the four classes of Buddhist practitioners: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Representing the category of monks was Shengjie Dinghui 乘戒定慧 from Suzhou, a late Qing dynasty Tiantai master who strongly advocated the practice of Pure Land Buddha-recitation, and whose collection of poems, which circulated independently as well, was entitled *Weixin ji* 唯心集 (*Mind-Only Collection*).⁶⁹ Laymen were to be represented by none other than Peng Shaosheng, and laywomen by Tao Shan, the wife of Peng Shaosheng's nephew, Peng Xiluo 彭希洛 (1758–1896).⁷⁰ They could not find any suitable poems by nuns until they happened upon a copy of a collection entitled *Collection of Shadows and Echoes* (*Yingxiang ji* 影響集) by a nun named Lianghai Rude 量海如德, which had been in the possession of a woman by the name of Yao Guiming 姚古明, a lay disciple of Shengjie Dinghui. The collection was then printed under the title of *Wumen sizhong dizi jingtu shi* 吳門四眾弟子淨土詩 (*Pure Land Poems by Disciples of the Fourfold Sangha from Suzhou*).⁷¹

Unfortunately, there is little biographical information about Lianghai apart from what can be gleaned from her own writings. We know that she was from Suzhou and was highly regarded for her literary skills, and, like the laywoman Yao Guiming, was a disciple of Shengjie Dinghui, who at some point became the abbess of a convent

68. For more on Miaokong, see Beata Grant, “Women in the Religious and Publishing Worlds of Buddhist Master Miaokong (1826–1880),” in *At the Shores of the Sky: Asian Studies for Albert Hoffstädt*, ed. Paul W. Kroll and Jonathan A. Silk (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2020).

69. In his preface to this collection, Shengjie explicitly notes that his collection came about largely in response to the request of fellow Lotus Society practitioners for materials relating to the practice of “mind-only in Pure Land and Chan” (*chanjing weixin* 禪淨唯心). “Zixu 自序,” *Weixin ji* 唯心集, CBETA X62, no. 1208, p. 1a.

70. Tao Shan's *Qionglou yinggao* 瓊樓吟稿 (*Draft Chants of Jade Tower*) was first printed in 1821 as an appendix to her husband's collection and was later included in the *Extended Buddhist Canon* (*Xuzang jing*). See CBETA X62, no. 1213.

71. There are only a few copies of this anthology still extant, including ones at Waseda University in Japan, Columbia University, the University of Melbourne, and a few rare book collections in the PRC, including the Guizhou Provincial Library.

in Suzhou and had a sizeable community of nuns under her guidance. While Jiang Yuanliang and Master Miaokong were primarily interested in Lianghai's poetry, which included several extended series of verses on the Pure Land,⁷² Lianghai's larger collection, a version of which can be found in the *Extended Chinese Buddhist Canon* (*Xuzangjing* 蓄藏經), also contains examples of her prose writings, including a few Dharma talks addressed to her monastic community that offer a glimpse of Lianghai's views on the female monastic. From these talks, we can see that Lianghai felt that, although Buddhist monasticism in her day had drifted far from its original ideals, one could still find a few large monasteries that adhered to strict rules of conduct and where disciples would listen and absorb the teachings of the eminent monks, and although they began by being lost and confused, they would eventually be able to achieve understanding. This was not the case, however, in the Buddhist convents:

We *bhikṣuṇī* are not like this. We spend the entire day in chatter, and chasing after physical pleasures, we hasten to seek out externals without having turned inward in reflection. Those who are teachers do not teach, and those who are disciples do not learn. Unfortunately, since time passes and a lifetime only lasts for but the snap of the fingers, one will not have benefitted at all from one's brief sojourn in this world.⁷³

我輩比丘尼眾。都無此也。終日喧喧。逐色隨聲。向外馳求。未嘗返省。為師不教。為徒不學。光陰可惜。剎那一生。荏再人間而無所益。

Lianghai here draws on traditional stereotypes regarding the feminine tendency to indulge in empty chatter and frivolous pursuits, and later in the same talk says, "When women leave the householder's life, they should also abandon the habits of women (*nüren zhi xi* 女人之習) and cultivate the seeds of perfect wisdom. Only by doing so will they become models of religious practice and worthy of great respect" (夫女人出家。當棄女人之習。發勝妙之種)。

For a past model of an ideal female monastic, Lianghai turns to the last chapter of the *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (*Flower Garland Sutra*, Skt. *Avatamsaka-sūtra*), which often circulated independently, and recounts

72. For English translations of some of these Pure Land verses, see Beata Grant, *An Anthology of Poems by Buddhist Nuns of Late Imperial China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 319–337.

73. CBETA X62, no. 1209, p. 822a18–22.

the pilgrimage undertaken by the youth Sudhana in search of enlightenment. Lianghai notes that of the fifty-two teachers Sudhana visits along the way, over twenty are female, although only one is a nun:

The *Huayan jing* speaks of fifty-three wise ones who as teachers can be compared to the Buddha. While there is only one nun who has the title of teacher, one can know that authoritative power and eminence, and the ultimate realization of the Buddha mind, need not be any the less for being a nun.⁷⁴

花嚴以人中師子比佛。五十三善知識。獨一比丘尼：以師子為號。可知威神卓越。成就佛心。不以比丘尼而遂弱也。

The one nun referred to here is *Sinhavijurmbhita* (*Shizi duoxun* 師子奮迅), whose name means “Lion Stretching.” From her description in the sutra, we can see why Lianghai might set her up as a model for all female monastics:

Her mind tranquil and still and all her senses under control, she was like a great elephant,⁷⁵ like a crystal-clear spring, like a wish-fulfilling jewel; unstained by the five desires, she was like a lotus flower; her mind fearless, she was like a lion king;⁷⁶ settled and disciplined, she was as unshakeable as Mount Sumeru.⁷⁷

其心寂靜，調伏諸根，譬如龍象，如澄淨淵如意寶珠；五欲不染，猶如蓮華；心無所畏，如師子王；安住淨戒不可傾動，如須彌山。

Lianghai also looks to the *Lotus Sutra* for models, in particular the well-known story of the Dragon King’s daughter found in chapter twelve (*Devadatta*). Her focus, however, is not the eight year-old girl who, to the consternation of *Śāriputra*, manifests her enlightened mind by magically transforming her female body into that of a man. Rather, it is on the several thousand nuns who were witnesses to this marvelous event. These nuns are described as having accompanied *Yaśodharā*, the wife of the historical Buddha, and *Mahāpajāpatī*, his stepmother and the founder of the order of nuns. At this gathering, the Buddha predicts that both *Yaśodharā* and *Mahāpajāpatī* will themselves first become *bodhisattvas*, after which they will attain the

74. CBETA X62, no. 1209, p. 822a10–13.

75. Literally a “dragon elephant,” an epithet often used to refer to great buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and saints.

76. “Lion King” is an epithet often used to refer to the Buddha himself.

77. CBETA T09, no. 278, p. 175b16–19.

supreme enlightenment, or buddhahood. It is not clear if he includes the nuns who are with them in this prediction, but their presence is, for Lianghai, an indication that these nuns were highly realized if not fully enlightened.

Another text in her collection that provides a glimpse into Lianghai's views on gender is the one she wrote after having gone on pilgrimage to King Aśoka Temple (Ayuwang 阿育王寺) in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province. There, like many devotees before her,⁷⁸ she burned off one of her fingers in demonstration of her religious commitment. In this text, she expresses contrition for her moral failures in this and in past lives.

It is because of the karmic consequences and conditioning from a prior lifetime that I have been born into the body of a woman. I've studied the true teachings but not yet mastered them; I've cultivated pure karma, but not yet reached perfection. Although I have found myself in the ranks of monastics, there are still precepts that I have violated.⁷⁹

因緣宿習。感報女流。學正教以靡窮。修淨業而罔就。雖墮僧數。於戒有違反。

In the subsequent passages, Lianghai then vows to dedicate herself to a life of purification and practice such that “forgetting both body and mind, I can be of benefit both to myself and others” 忘身與意。利己及人。 Finally, she turns to the question of rebirth in the Pure Land:

I also vow that when it comes to the end of my life, my three minds⁸⁰ will completely manifest, the threefold hindrances⁸¹ will immediately

78. James Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 33.

79. CBETA X62, no. 1209, p. 821c12-13.

80. The three minds (*sanxin* 三心) can have various meanings, but in the context of Pure Land teachings it refers to the three mental states that will assuredly lead to rebirth in the Pure Land: perfect sincerity (*zhichengxin* 至誠心), deep resolve (*shenxin* 深心), and a mind inclined to dedicating one's merit to others (*huixiang fayuanxin* 迴向發願心).

81. The threefold obstruction refers to the hindrances of afflictions 煩惱障, the hindrances of past karmic actions 業障, and the hindrance of painful retribution 異熟障, in this case perhaps referring to having been born as a woman.

dissolve, and the lotus of the superior rank⁸² will bloom. The Buddha will bestow upon me the prediction of enlightenment, and I will be able to honor and serve all the buddhas of the ten directions and liberate all sentient beings, until the end of limitless time, never suffering any weariness.

更願臨命終時。三心圓顯。三障頓消。蓮開上品之花。佛授菩提之記。承事十方諸佛。度化一切有情。盡未來際。無有疲厭。

Interestingly, Lianghai's death was rather different (and more realistic) than those often described in traditional Pure Land hagiographies. She appears to have been forced to flee her convent when the Taiping armies took control of Suzhou in 1860, and to have died not long afterwards.⁸³ A very brief and somewhat cryptic account attributed to the laywoman Yao Guiming describes her final moments as follows:

Lianghai caught a terrible disease⁸⁴ while fleeing from the armies [of the Taiping]. Someone asked why, given that she was a woman of such great spiritual cultivation, she had to suffer this terrible disease. She replied, saying, "Each and every one of these things is a manifestation of perfection; it is just that you do not realize it." When she lay

82. Aspirants for rebirth in the Pure Land are ranked into three grades, the highest being reserved for those who become monastics, perform meritorious deeds, and awaken the desire for enlightenment by meditating on Amitābha Buddha. According to Pure Land teachings, after achieving enlightenment in the Pure Land, one will then be equipped to dedicate oneself to the liberation of all sentient beings as a bodhisattva.

83. A Western observer traveling to Suzhou around this time provides the following vivid description of the devastation in this area: "The towns and villages presented a very sad spectacle. These once flourishing marts are entirely deserted, and thousands of houses are burnt down to the ground. Here and there a solitary old man or old woman may be seen moving slowly and trembling among the ruins, musing and weeping over the terrible desolation that reigns around. Together with such scenes, the number of dead bodies that continually met the eye were indescribably sickening to the heart." Quoted in Tobie S. Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 118.

84. The term "evil" disease (*e ji* 惡疾) is often used to refer to a chronic and incurable disease and in the *Vinaya* is described as being "exceedingly painful, disgusting and disagreeable." See Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *The Buddhist Monastic Code II: The Khandhaka Rules Translated & Explained*, 3rd rev. ed. (Valley Center, CA: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), n.p., <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/bmc2.pdf>.

dying, she [supposedly] repeatedly called out my name before finally passing away. When I was told about this, I said: “The time of death is a truly urgent one, with barely have enough time to call on the Buddha. How would she have had the time to call on me?”⁸⁵

量海。避兵有惡疾。人曰。既是大修行人。何故有此惡疾。答曰。此一波羅蜜。非汝所知也。臨終時。徹夜呼余名。既卒。人以告余。余曰。此時真喫緊。念佛未遑。豈遑念我。

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As has often been noted, in premodern China, female monastics were regarded by many with considerable ambivalence and, as women living outside of the domestic realm and no longer subject to the so-called “three followings” (*sancong* 三從) to father, husband, and son, held to almost impossibly high standards of virtue. This was, it might be argued, particularly true within the Pure Land tradition. The inferiority of the female gender implied by the famous thirty-fifth vow of Dharmākara in which the Amitābha-Buddha-to-be declares that there will be no women in his Pure Land was in practice often overlooked and even explicitly questioned. However, like the Biblical story of Eve created from Adam’s rib, it was always there in the background. Moreover, Pure Land was often touted as being an “easy” path that could be just as well carried out within the domestic realm and, unlike the Chan school, did not require women to leave home to seek intensive training under the tutelage of realized masters. This, combined with the traditional story of the Buddha’s reluctance to admit women into the sangha and his declaration that doing so would lead to a degeneration of the Dharma, contributed to a general disregard for female monastics. Nevertheless, the traditional Buddhist notion of a fourfold sangha comprised of nuns and laywomen as well as monks and nuns required the inclusion of female monastics in the recorded tradition. And in some ways, the small number of nuns whose names appear repeatedly in Pure Land compendia might indeed be regarded as token fulfillments of this requirement. As some of our compilers could not help but note, there were probably significantly more nuns than the few for whom records were preserved. Moreover, as we have

85. “Lianghai yishi 量海軼事” (An Anecdote Concerning Lianghai), in *Xiuxi wenjian lu* 修西聞見錄, CBETA X78, no. 1552, p. 399a20–23.

seen, even in the case of those regarded as sufficiently exemplary, we find the accounts of their lives being shaped to fit specific editorial agendas and, in some cases, whittled down to a single line. This is not unusual in women's history, whether in China or elsewhere, especially when dealing with earlier periods for which we have few extant writings by women themselves. Although still subject to the vagaries of preservation, as we move forward in time we find a few more detailed biographies as well as women-authored religious texts such as those by the nun Lianghai, which are especially valuable in that they offer a glimpse of how a particular nun might have wanted to be seen and remembered. These records, whether hagiographic accounts shaped by male editors and compilers or women-authored, suggest a rich, if probably forever lost, tradition of nuns who sought to actualize themselves in this life even as they aspired to rebirth in the Pure Land in the next.