

## Article

# Equality of Access? Chinese Women Practicing Chan and Transnational Meditation in Contemporary China

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how the Buddhist revival, the Chan revival, and recent popularity of transnational meditation practices have facilitated Chinese women practicing Buddhist meditation in contemporary China. With the influence of the opening of China and growing transnational networks, there has been an increasing number of Han Chinese monastics and lay people practicing transnational meditation, such as *samādhi*, *vipassanā* and mindfulness, in the past two decades. Despite the restriction of accessing Chan halls at monasteries, some Chinese nuns and laywomen have traveled to learn meditation in different parts of China, and international meditation centers in Southeast Asia to study with yogis from all over the world. Surprisingly some returned female travelers have taken significant roles in organizing meditation retreats, and establishing meditation centers and meditation halls. Through examining some ethnographic cases of Chinese nuns and laywomen, this paper argues that the transnational meditation movement has an impact not only on gender equality, especially concerning Chinese women practicing meditation, but also on the development of contemporary Chinese Buddhism. The significant role of Chinese female meditators in promoting Buddhist meditation can reflect a trend of re-positioning the Chan School in contemporary China.

**Keywords:** Chan; transnational meditation; Han Chinese; nuns; women



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## 1. Introduction

Over the ten-day *vipassanā* meditation (*neiguanchan* 內觀禪) retreat at Yunshan Monastery<sup>1</sup> 雲山寺 in southern China in 2016, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen practiced diligently sitting in the meditation hall together or walking meditation in the courtyard (Lau 2017).<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, there were more female than male participants. It was a familiar scene that I had encountered at other Chinese Buddhist monasteries in my previous fieldwork (Figure 1). Among the fifty Han Chinese participants, there were one monk, seven nuns, nineteen laymen and twenty-three laywomen. They came from different parts of China with diverse backgrounds, including psychotherapists, civil servants, school teachers and students. Surprisingly, most informants who joined this retreat shared with me that gender difference is not relevant to the ability to practice meditation and attain liberation. For instance, Yaolan, a psychotherapist, told me that, “there is indeed a physical difference between men and women. Yet when wisdom arises, there is no difference between men and women.” Mr. Xiang, an engineer, explained that, “In the teachings of the Buddha, it is confirmed that women can attain full liberation as men in becoming arahants/arhats”.

U Tejaniya Sayadaw from Yangon was invited to give some guidance in this retreat at a multi-functional hall of the monastery instead of the official Chan hall (*chantang* 禪堂)<sup>3</sup>, which women could not access. As I learned, although most nuns could not speak English, they seriously reported their practices to the Burmese teacher with the help of a translator. I finally had the chance to talk to some nuns on the last day of the retreat.



**Figure 1.** Monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen were practicing sitting meditation in the hall of Yunshan Monastery (taken by the author).

Dressed with a gray robe in Chinese Buddhist tradition, Bhikṣuṇī Rongdao told me, “This was the first time I attended a meditation retreat led by Deshi 德師<sup>4</sup>. I have benefited from the practices.” Rongdao, the abbess of Baolian Chan Monastery 寶蓮禪寺, a Buddhist nunnery in Jianxi Province, has learned meditation, including the Chan School type of meditation in traditional Chinese Buddhism and *vipassanā* meditation in the Thai tradition, as her key spiritual practices. It is well known that there is a lack of meditation halls and facilities for the growing interest of Buddhist nuns in meditation practices in mainland China. With a dignified gesture, gentle voice and joyful tone, she shared her dream with me, “I wish that I could build two meditation halls at the nunnery. The ground floor is for Chan meditation in Northern tradition (*beichuan* 北傳). The second floor is for the *vipassanā* meditation in Southern tradition (*nanchuan* 南傳)”. In the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context, the Southern tradition refers to Theravāda (*shangzuobu* 上座部)<sup>5</sup> and the Northern tradition refers to Mahāyāna (*dachen* 大乘).<sup>6</sup> The story of Rongdao was so intriguing in the study of Chinese Buddhism in contemporary China. On the one hand, it is worth exploring her experiences in meditation practices in various traditions as a Chinese Buddhist nun. On the other hand, her ambitious idea of facilitating nuns and laywomen in learning Buddhist meditation was quite unexpected in a patriarchal religious tradition, especially under state control.

Since the opening of China and market reforms in the 1980s, Buddhism has been progressively revived with many historical Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries being reconstructed in mainland China, with funds raised from overseas (Ashiwa and Wank 2005). However, only very few Chan halls have been established in these monasteries due to the shortage of resources and knowledge. Only monks can access the Chan halls. It seems that the opportunities for the spiritual development of Chinese women, including *bhikṣuṇīs*, fully ordained nuns and laywomen in Chan practices have been generally restricted in the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context. Yet, with the economic conditions and popularity of various forms of transnational meditation since the turn of the century, there has been an increasing number of monastics and lay people practicing transnational meditation, such as *samādhi*, *vipassanā* and mindfulness from different teachers, in mainland China or by traveling to Southeast Asian countries (Lau 2020b, 2021a).<sup>7</sup> Some monks and nuns have facilitated the establishment of public Chan halls at monasteries and Chan halls at

nunneries. Furthermore, some returned nuns and laywomen have devoted themselves to setting up *vipassanā* meditation centers and organizing meditation retreats (Lau 2021a; Bianchi n.d.). In the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context, it is interesting and significant to ask: to what extent have Chinese Buddhist women been denied access to the Chan halls for meditation practices today, after the Buddhist revival? Why and how have Chinese nuns and laywomen been learning Buddhist meditation in other traditions? How do Chinese Buddhist women involve themselves in promoting and teaching Buddhist meditation?

In the context of contemporary Buddhist practices in China, where the experience of women is understudied, the present paper focuses on how women's inclusion and involvement in Buddhist meditation practices in China have changed since the opening of China in the 1980s and access has been granted to Theravāda traditions from Southeast Asia. After examining the contexts of the Buddhist revival in China and the traditional place of women in Theravāda traditions, drawing from multi-sited ethnographic studies in contemporary China and Southeast Asian countries since 2014,<sup>8</sup> this paper explores the experiences of Han Chinese women learning Theravāda meditation practices in China, women traveling to Southeast Asia to learn meditation, and the ways in which women's participation in China via their access to Theravāda traditions has led to greater access, inclusion, and equality for women practicing and promoting Buddhist meditation, by establishing meditation centers and Chan halls in contemporary China. From the case studies, this paper argues that despite the restriction of accessing Chan halls at monasteries, Chinese nuns and laywomen in contemporary China have strived to gain equal opportunities in their spiritual development in meditation practices with the influence of transnational meditation.

## 2. Buddhist Revival and “Chan Fever” Following the Opening and Market Reforms

Over the last two millennia, Buddhism has successfully “captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of Chinese”, from all social strata, including emperors, the educated and poor peasants (Poceski 2017, p. 80). Buddhism became the most dominant, widespread and influential religion in Chinese culture and society over the Tang dynasty (618–907), when the schools of Chan, Tiantai and Huayan were developed as iconic traditions in Chinese Buddhism. While Buddhism was declining in India in around the eleventh century, Buddhism was spreading from China to other parts of East Asia (Poceski 2009, pp. 148–58), such as Japan and Korea.<sup>9</sup> Among the crises of Chinese Buddhism in the modern era, the corruption of the empire was one of the destructive events that occurred during the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864) during the late Qing Dynasty (Welch 1968, p. 96). For instance, the movement of converting all temples into schools was launched by Zhang Zhidong 張之洞, a Qing Dynasty government officer in 1898. Another crisis occurred during the Republican era, when Protestant missionaries, social elites and reformers criticized Chinese religions, as well as Buddhism, as superstitious (*mixin* 迷信), non-scientific and regressive (Ashiwa and Wank 2009).

Facing the crises of monastic corruption and institutional conservatism with a lack of monastic education, Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), the father of the Buddhist revival, devoted his life and resources to building up modern Buddhist institutes and printing houses for printing Buddhist scriptures. Yang's student, Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), made great efforts in rejuvenating modern Buddhist institutes, including Theravāda and Tibetan traditions, in order to re-develop the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the challenges of modernity, there were eminent monastic leaders who devoted themselves to the revival of schools in a traditional way and to attracting many followers over the late Qing and Republican period. Yinguang 印光 (1862–1940), who was well known for his teachings of the Pure Land tradition. Xuyun 虛雲 (1840–1959), was the most influential Chan master in the twentieth century, and had attracted thousands of followers from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and the West. With his charisma, Xuyun restored many monasteries, including those major centers of Chan practice (Welch 1968, pp. 90–96). Yet, since the 1960s, during the Cultural Revolution, Buddhism, as well as

Chinese religions in China, was again destroyed: the activities of Buddhist organizations had stopped, monasteries had been destroyed or occupied. Monks and nuns were asked to leave the monasteries and nunneries until the end of Mao's era in 1978 (Wen 2019).

Since the opening of China in the 1980s, various kinds of Chinese religious and mind-body practices have been reinvented and redeveloped in mainland China. For example, a modernized form of qigong was reinvented as a simple gymnastic practice by a group of Communist cadres in Hebei in the 1950s. The qigong "fever" that swept post-Mao China in the 1980s, provoked the popularity of body technology for healing, intersecting with ancient culture, religion and science. Millions of Chinese practiced various kinds of qigong to cultivate "qi" in public areas, such as parks and squares in cities, every morning (Palmer 2007, pp. 1–5). Following that was the "psychoboom" (*xinlire* 心理熱) (Pritzker 2016) and health cultivation (*yangsheng* 養生) culture (Dear 2012), covering bodily exercises, lifestyle, nutrition and Chinese medicine.

Buddhism has been progressively revived with many historical monasteries being reconstructed with fund raised from overseas (Ashiwa and Wank 2005); for example, the Bailing Chan Monastery 柏林禪寺, Yunman Monastery 雲門寺 and Nanhua Monastery 南華寺. The number of Han Chinese monasteries and Buddhist clergy has been growing extraordinarily (Chiu 2019, pp. 165–66). There were more than 15,000 functioning Han Chinese monasteries and 100,000 Han Buddhist clerics in mainland China in 2006 (World Buddhist Forum 2006, cited in Ji 2013). Over the same period, a few films containing martial arts with *Shaolin gongfu* 少林功夫 had initiated "Chan fever" (*chanxuere* 禪學熱) (Ji 2011, pp. 32–52), arousing the popular interest of not only Buddhist tourism, but also Chan meditation practices.<sup>11</sup> Regular seven-day Chan retreats (*chanqi* 禪七) were organized at a few historical Chan monasteries. A famous Chan monastery, with the heritage of Chan Master Zhaozhou 趙州, was reconstructed by Jinghui 淨慧, a disciple of the recent great Chan master, Xuyun (Wang 2019a, 2019b). Foyuan 佛源, an attendant of Xuyun who received the Yunmen lineage, rebuilt the Yunman Dajue Chan Monastery 雲門大覺禪寺 in Guangdong Province and revived the Chan retreat (Birnbbaum 2003, p. 442; Wang 2019b)<sup>12</sup>. Regular seven-day Chan retreats (*chanqi* 禪七) were organized at a few historical Chan monasteries by the disciples of recent eminent Chan monks, such as Master Xuyun and Master Laiguo 來果. Traditional practices in Chan monasteries generally have been revived, including regular morning chanting (*zaoke* 早課) and evening chanting (*wanke* 晚課) at the main shrine hall, and silent meals (*guotan* 過堂) at the dining hall (*zaitang* 齋堂). Monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen can join practicing these rituals together. However, only monks could enter the few established Chan halls in the Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries in mainland China. However, Chinese nuns and laywomen were denied access to the Chan halls.

Jinghui (2005), the abbot of Bailin Monastery, worried that Buddhist rituals or ceremonies would be seen as superstitious and old-fashioned by young people. In 1993, Jinghui started organizing the "life Chan summer camp" (生活禪夏令營) to suit the needs of modern life, targeting young educated males and females. By using Chan wisdom, he promoted "Buddhism for this world" to young people. The camp, which attracted about 200 university students every year, provided lectures by young monks and scholars, discussions on ethical issues, meditation sessions, performances and candle-lighting nights.<sup>13</sup> After that, similar camps were organized by many Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries throughout the country.

With the popular atmosphere of learning meditation, via the support of Taiwanese and Hong Kong meditation practitioners, various kinds of transnational meditation, for example, Theravāda Buddhist meditation, started to spread in contemporary China in the late 1990s. The first ten-day *vipassanā* meditation retreat in China was held at Bailin Monastery in 1999, with over one hundred Chinese monastics and lay people. This ten-day retreat followed the teachings of Goenka, a lay meditation teacher with Burmese lineage. Since then, similar *vipassanā* meditation retreats were organized and held in different Chinese Buddhist Monasteries or secular venues (Lau 2020b). By searching the Chinese term "vipas-

sanā meditation” (neiguanchanxiu 內觀禪修) on baidu.com, one of the most popular search engines in mainland China, 385,000 items were found.<sup>14</sup> After returning to China, Chinese monastics and lay people would share their fruitful meditation experiences with friends in local meditation communities. Since the 2010s, these practitioners have “transplanted” the Theravāda meditation experience in Buddhist communities by creating sacred spaces, propagating their favorite teachings through networking and cyber technology, organizing practice groups and even establishing new meditation centers in mainland China (for example, the teachings of Goenka, Pa Auk Sayadaw and Mahāsi Saydaw). Information about various Thai and Burmese teachers and their teachings, photos and audio clips of dhamma talks and electronic books have been shared on websites. Retreats and regular practice groups, and the recruitment of volunteers are shared by mobile applications (Lau 2021a, pp. 192–93).

Mindfulness meditation (zhengnian 正念) programs,<sup>15</sup> such as MBSR and MBCT, another popular transnational meditation, secularized and decontextualized originated from *vipassanā*, were introduced to educated professionals and psychologists in big cities in China since 2010 (2021a).<sup>16</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn and Mark Williams, the founders of MBSR and MBCT, were invited to conduct professional training in China in the past decade. Some monastics and Buddhist lay people were attracted to attend these mindfulness training programs due to the claimed effectiveness in clinical settings (Lau 2014). For example, there were three Chinese monks among the participants, which exceeded 200 individuals, in a 7-day MBSR training program conducted by Kabat-Zinn in November 2013.

The existing transnational meditation activities in contemporary China can be categorized into four main models (Lau 2021a, p. 193). The first model involves retreats based on solely one tradition held in Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries; for example, there were six *vipassanā* meditation retreat centers imparting Goenka’s teaching, found in China in 2017. It is estimated that over 100,000 Chinese people joined the 10-day retreat in the past 2 decades.<sup>17</sup> The second model refers to retreats based on various teachings upheld in different Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries (for example, retreats based on the teachings of U Tejaniya Sayadaw, hosted by different monasteries across the country). It is estimated that over 5000 participants were involved in the second model.<sup>18</sup> The third model is the establishment of a long-term Theravāda Buddhist community. For example, Dhammavihārī Forest Monastery, following the teaching of Pa Auk Sayadaw, was established in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province in 2013. Among the 100 residents at the summer retreats in 2015, there were 11 *bhikkhus*, 25 *samaneris*, 21 ten precept nuns, 11 laymen and 32 laywomen. The fourth model involves meditation practices, such as *vipassanā* or mindfulness, at secular venues, such as universities, yoga clubs or resort centers.<sup>19</sup> There are no official statistics found for the activities involving transnational meditation. Yet, from fieldwork, it is estimated that over 150,000 Chinese individuals joined various kinds of transnational meditation in mainland China, excluding those who traveled to learn meditation in other countries.

Unlike Chan meditation retreats held in monasteries, all transnational meditation events, including Theravāda and mindfulness retreats, allow the four assemblies, including monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, to participate. Nevertheless, most Chan halls in the monasteries still refuse entry to women. The present study argues that this is one of the main reasons for which many nuns and laywomen travel to learn meditation in Southeast Asia, where meditation centers welcome both men and women. Does it mean that nuns and laywomen have a restricted potential for spiritual achievement in practicing Chan meditation, a unique Chinese Buddhist practice? It would be significant to examine the issue of the spiritual potential of women from the texts and historical discourses of early Buddhism and Chan Buddhism.

### 3. Spiritual Potential of Women in the Theravāda Tradition and the Chan School

The view that a woman is not able to become a Buddha in this present life is popularly adopted in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, which originated from early Chinese Mahāyāna

Buddhist texts. It is said that the spiritual potential of women was restricted by the Five Obstacles (*wuzhang* 五障) and Three Dependences (*sancong* 三從). For the Five Obstacles, with the karmic burden, women are limited to be reborn as the gods Brahma, Sakra, Mara, the Wheel-Turning King, and as a buddha (Faure 2003, pp. 62–63).<sup>20</sup> The patriarchal notion of the Three Dependences preexisted in ancient India and China. Women are expected to live in full subordination to their parents before marriage, to their husbands after marriage and to their sons after the death of the husbands (Faure 2003, pp. 63–64). The Three Dependences are not only found in the *Book of Rites* (*lijì* 禮記), a Confucian text, but also in Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論 and the *Huayanjing* 華嚴經. Interestingly, despite the hope of escaping from the dependencies in the secular world, women who joined the Buddhist order were forced to depend on the monks serving them as fathers and sons at monasteries. Moreover, the acceptance of the eight *gurudharma* (*bajingfa* 八敬法) in the long history of Chinese Buddhism, reflected the inferior roles of Chinese Buddhist women (Chiu and Heirman 2014). This paper will subsequently examine the spiritual potential of women in the Theravāda tradition and the Chan School, from the texts in the historical and contemporary context, accordingly.

In the Theravāda tradition, from Pāli scriptures, women are described as temptresses with an uncontrolled sexual appetite. For example, in the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha suggested to Ananda that monks should avoid seeing women and talking to women, and if they could not avoid talking to them, they have to maintain mindfulness during the conversation (Harris 1999, p. 51). Nonetheless, Pāli texts confirm that the potential for final spiritual achievement, the attainment of *nibbana*, is the same for men and women. During the Buddha's time, there were excellent female spiritual teachers. Thirteen nuns were recorded for their meditation achievement and teaching capacity. For example, the Buddha appreciated the nun Dhammadina for her great wisdom while she was teaching her former husband (Harris 1999, p. 58). Moreover, the spiritual potential of female practitioners is confirmed in the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of verses about fully enlightened women. For instance, Dhirā was appreciated for her attainment of arahantship: “Dhirā, brave sister, who hath valiantly thy faculties in noblest culture trained. Bear to this end thy last incarnate frame. For Thou has conquered Māra and his host<sup>21</sup>”.

However, it seems that there are many contradictory interpretations about the attitudes towards women in the Pāli text (Engelmajer 2015). Women presented in Pāli texts are “both marginal and indispensable”, which is similar to the ancient Indian tradition (Engelmajer 2015, p. 114). The *Bhikkhunīs* tradition was part of the Buddhist community, founded by Mahāpajāpatī during the Buddha's lifetime. However, Buddhist women were expected to join the Sangha only as a last step in their lives after fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, as the spiritual agency of nurturing monks and supporting Sangha. The role of women as daily donors in temples and alms-round in contemporary Theravāda countries is still crucial and valued today. Yet, from the very limited appearance of identified *bhikkhunīs* in the Nikayas, *bhikkhunīs* have slightly lower achievements than the *bhikkhus*. Surprisingly, the female renunciators in contemporary southeastern countries present a very different picture of the spiritual path of Buddhist women.

Interestingly, from other Mahāyāna texts and practices in Chinese Buddhism, there are contradicting perspectives about the spiritual development and achievement of women. From the *Lotus Sūtra*, by turning to a man, the *nāga*-girl finally becomes a Buddha. Yet, as Faure (2003, pp. 119–21) discussed, in Mahāyāna, forms are said to be empty; hence, gender difference is also empty. For example, in the *Sūtra of the Nāga King Sagara*, the *nāga*-girl told Mahā Kāśyapa that “when one knows through awakening and possesses the Dharma, there is neither man nor woman” (Faure 2003, p. 120). This is one of the examples expressing both the inequality and equality of spiritual development among women.

From the Pāli texts, such as the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Buddha and his disciples practiced meditation under a tree, in a forest or an empty hut. A space called the meditation hall was not found. By researching Chinese texts before the emergence of the Chan School, Greene (2021) argues that Chan lineages and Chan masters from local and foreign places

existed in the fifth century. More interestingly, Buddhist temples with structures related to Chan practices can be found; for example, *chan* cloisters (*chanyuan* 禪院), *chan* quarters (*chanfang* 禪坊), *chan* halls (*chantang* 禪堂) and *chan* pavilions (*change* 禪閣) (Greene 2021, pp. 41–42). There is a record of a *chan* quarters being used in the fifth century. A biography of a nun, Jingxiu 淨秀 (d. 506), recorded the *chan* quarters of her temple as a large communal meditation hall (Greene 2021, p. 43). The detail of the architecture and regulations of the spaces of Chan practices, in the early period before the establishment of the Chan School, is not yet known. However, it is evident that nuns and laywomen were learning and teaching Chan in the fifth century.

From many Chan texts (*koan* or stories), those well-known eminent Chan masters from the Tang dynasty were mainly monks. For example, the first patriarch, Damo 達摩, and the other five patriarchs were men. However, some prominent Chan nuns in ancient and medieval China are recorded in the Records of the Transmission of the Lamp (*Chuandenglu* 傳燈錄), the hagiographical collections. For example, Moshan Liaoran, during the Tang dynasty, and Lady Tang, a disciple of Master Dahui during the Sung dynasty, were prominent female Chan masters and practitioners (Faure 2003, pp. 127–34). Moreover, nuns participating meditation activities in ancient China and in recent centuries were also recorded (Shih Pao-ch'ang 1994; Grant 2003). For example, *Biographies of Bhikṣuṇī* (*biqunichuan* 比丘尼傳) recorded that nuns actively learn meditation in the Northern and Southern schools in medieval China, in the sixth century (Wu 2000, pp. 117–19). In the late Ming period, there was a meditation hall (*chantang*) built in a small private Buddhist nunnery, governed by strict rules bestowed by religiously active nuns (Eichman 2019, p. 237). Yet, the Chan hall was devoted to Pure Land practice and the daily regimen of Buddhist recitation, instead of Chan cultivation (Eichman 2019, p. 274). Furthermore, some scholars point out that *Chanyuan qingui* (Rules of Purity at the Chan Monastery) can be a problematic text.<sup>22</sup> In summary, from the recent study of Chinese Buddhist texts and historical records, some Chinese nuns and laywomen not only had the opportunities of practicing Chan meditation, but also had become prominent Chan masters in ancient China. Moreover, Chan halls were established for female practitioners.

In the recent century, Bhikṣuṇī Longlian 隆蓮 (1909–2006) was not only the first Chinese woman passing the government civil service examination in the late Qing period, but also a legend as an eminent nun in the Chinese Buddhist community as well as mainland China.<sup>23</sup> Longlian shared her meditation experience in her poem “Morning Service”: “Flowers encircle the meditation room, the night air crisp, the frosty bells deep and dark rouse the great leviathan” (Grant 2003, p. 158). From evidences in ancient, medieval and contemporary China, some Chinese women demonstrated their access to meditation halls or spaces for practicing Chan meditation. The potential of spiritual achievement of Chinese nuns is also recognized in the records of eminent female Chan masters.

In the eleventh century in Sri Lanka, as the *bhikkhunī* lineage was lost in the Theravāda tradition, female celebrates or renunciators in the Mahāyāna tradition, in countries, including Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, do not generally receive a full ordination status as *Bhikṣuṇīs* nowadays (Collins and McDaniel 2010; Kawanami 2007).<sup>24</sup> In the contemporary context, Buddhist nuns in the Theravāda tradition normally receive eight or ten precepts, while fully ordained *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Mahāyāna tradition receive over three hundred precepts. Due to the marginal and ambiguous status in monastic communities, precept nuns in the Theravāda tradition have not easily survived. Although there has been a *bhikkhunī* revival movement initiated in Sri Lanka, in the 1980s, tension has been created between international *bhikkhunīs* with liberal ideas and nuns from traditional local communities.

Nevertheless, the influence of Buddhist modernization and the recent lay meditation movement in Southeast Asian Buddhist countries have created opportunities for nuns and women to learn and practice meditation on an equal footing with monks and laymen (Schedneck 2017; Tsomo 2000). In her fieldwork in Myanmar, Jordt (2007) has witnessed precept nuns and laywomen practicing and participating in the lay meditation movement, particularly in the Mahāsī's *vipassanā* tradition, since the 1960s. Cook (2010) has also

demonstrated how nuns and laywomen practice modernized *vipassanā* meditation in monasteries in Thailand. Overall, the lay meditation movement in Myanmar and Southeast Asian countries has given rise to a large-scale institution and created openings for women to learn, practice and even teach meditation.

Furthermore, in the lay meditation movement of the last century, female meditation teachers, both nuns and laywomen, have been publicly recognized in Myanmar and Thailand. For example, Ajahn Naeb (1897–1983) was a well-known female lay teacher of abhidhamma and *vipassanā* meditation in modern Thailand. Her teachings were introduced in *Living Buddhist Masters*, a well-known work by Kornfield (1977), a first-generation lay meditation teacher in the West. In the Thai forest tradition, Mae Chi Kaew (1901–1991) was considered to have attained a full awakening by a well-respected meditation monk, Luangda Mahabua (1913–2011), also known as Ajaan Mahā Boowa, as evidenced by her relics (Schedneck 2017; Seeger 2018, pp. 156–58) and her experience (Seeger 2018, p. 90). Although the fame of her teaching was restricted to the local area and the forest tradition when she was alive, a published biography shows her spiritual achievements after her death (Sīlaratano 2012). From the ethnographic study of Seeger (2018), there have been eminent female renunciators for a long time in Thai history; yet, the lack of textual sources may have ignored their historical existence. The visibility of material things, such as relics, statues amulets and the hagiography sold in 7-Eleven shops, and the TV broadcasting of the case of Mae Chi Kaew, have presented the public recognition of the success of female saints in contemporary Thai society.

Mae chee or mae chi generally refers to older women dressed in white, living in or near temples serving monks as cooks or helpers (Collins and McDaniel 2010, pp. 1382–83). However, in contemporary Thailand, there are well educated *mae chi* studying and teaching the Pāli language and Abhidhamma (Collins and McDaniel 2010). Abhidhamma, which consists of the analysis of momentary Existents (*dhamma-s*) of the Pāli Canon, is known as the most profound aspect of the Buddha’s teachings, closely related to meditation practices. From the fieldwork of Collins and McDaniel (2010, pp. 1389–92), although not all mae chi were motivated to attain the 9th level of Pāli, some of them had not only passed the examinations, but also became teachers with a highly respected social status. For example, Ajaan Mae Chi Vimuttiyā, who published a Pāli commentary for her PhD thesis and many books on Pāli grammar and literature in Thai, is considered as one of the leading scholars in Pāli literature. Receiving awards from the Thai royal family, she became the director of the International Tripitaka Hall at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, developing education programs for advanced students of Pāli. With freedom to write, work and meditate, she had no desire of becoming a *bhikkhunī*. Another 9th-level Pāli scholar, Mae Chi Bunchuai Sriprem, a well-respected Pāli grammar teacher of monks and a dissertation advisor at Mahamakut Monastic University in Bangkok, observed no difference in the curriculum of Pāli. Mae Chi Ladda Komalasing chose not to teach Pāli, but instead focused on teaching Abhidhamma and meditation to lay people. She expressed that the quality of a Pāli teacher was about the objective and caring of students, and not about the identity of being a monk or a *mae chi*. The contribution of Buddhist meditation education by “professional celibate women”, as named by Collins and McDaniel, in contemporary Thailand and Myanmar, have broadened the horizon for many Chinese female practitioners about the possibilities of the spiritual path.

From my recent fieldwork in mainland China, it is expected that contemporary Chinese Buddhist nuns and laywomen have been inspired from the successful cases of female practitioners from the Theravāda tradition. Liu Fan, one of my Chinese female informants at Yunshan Monastery, shared with me the case of Dipa Ma as a successful model of a laywoman with spiritual achievement. Nani Barua (1911–1989), named as Dipa Ma, a Bengali widow and single mother, was another well-known Buddhist meditation teacher who instructed Indians and Western yogis in the last century (Schmidt 2005). After practicing *vipassanā* meditation, guided by Anagārika Shri Munindra in Mahāsī’s tradition for some years, an interview by Engler (2004)<sup>25</sup> led to the belief that Dipa Ma attained *sakadāgāmin*

or once-returned, the Second Path of enlightenment, which is the attainment of freedom from most sensual desires and anger. By invitation of Joseph Goldstein, one of her students, Dipa Ma led meditation retreats at the Insight Meditation Center in Massachusetts in the United States.<sup>26</sup> From my fieldwork with Chinese translated texts available in Taiwan (Schmidt [2005] 2013), mainland China and Chinese societies, both the cases of Dipa Ma and Mae Chi Kaew demonstrated the possibility of attaining enlightenment as female meditators in the present life, and have motivated many Chinese women to practice meditation in mainland China and other countries. Maggie, a 30-year-old lawyer from Beijing, traveled to Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma ordaining as a precept nun for a year for practicing meditation. She shared, in a firm tone, the following with me:

“The Buddha has mentioned that men and women can become arahant. I have strong faith of what the Buddha has said. Moreover, from my spiritual experiences and observation, I believe that the practice is the same [for men and women]. Certainly the Buddha has also mentioned that only a male can become a Buddha. Hence, there is difference between men and women in becoming a Buddha, yet [I believe] there is no difference [between men and women] in becoming an arahant.”

Perhaps, the quotes of Maggie can provide some insights to summarizing the complex and contradictory issue of the spiritual potential of Buddhist women from texts and historical evidences. Despite the marginal role of women in the family and Buddhist community in ancient India, women could attain as full a liberation as men, as described in the Pāli texts. In the contemporary context, nuns are not well treated as *bhikkhunī* due to the broken lineage in the Theravāda tradition. Yet, some precept nuns and laywomen, such as Mae Chi Kaew and Dipa Ma, are recognized as fully liberated practitioners and prominent meditation teachers. Despite the Mahāyāna celebration of emptiness, nonduality and the universality of Buddha-nature, the major scriptures have been ambiguous and reluctant to acknowledge the chance women stand in attaining full enlightenment in the female form. However, it is evidenced that Chinese nuns and laywomen in ancient and contemporary China, practiced Chan meditation in various dedicated spaces, such as the Chan quarters, Chan cloister and Chan hall. There is also a record of female Chan masters. All these facts can be utilized to argue against the situation in contemporary China of the denied access to women to the Chan hall.

#### 4. Women Learning Transnational Meditation in Mainland China

Since the turn of the century, with the influence and support from Taiwan and Hong Kong, meditation retreats with various traditions from Myanmar and Thailand, such as *vipassanā* or satipattana, have been held in Chinese Buddhist monasteries, so that Chinese nuns and laywomen have chances to learn and practice transnational meditation in mainland China (Lau 2021b). After the first *vipassanā* meditation retreat in the Goenka tradition was organized at Bailing Chan Monastery in 2001, an increasing number of *vipassanā* meditation retreats have been held in Chinese Buddhist monasteries in mainland China. Although Chinese nuns and laywomen cannot practice Chan meditation in most traditional Chan monasteries, they are given equal chances as monks and laymen practicing the imported transnational meditation. For example, as mentioned at the beginning of the present paper, there were many nuns and laywomen participating at the retreat in Yunshan Monastery (Lau 2017). Before attending the *vipassanā* retreat at Yunshan Monastery, Bhikṣuṇī Rongdao had a chance to learn mahasati dynamic meditation from the Thai tradition in China. In the year that she graduated from the Buddhist academy in Fujian in 2012, with the introduction of a classmate, Rongdao traveled to Wenzhou 温州 to attend a one-month meditation retreat in the mahasati dynamic (*dongzhongchan* 動中禪) tradition, organized by *Bhikṣuṇī* Xuzhi 續智. The meditation teacher in that retreat was Luangpor Thong (Longbo Tong 隆波通). This was the first time that Rongdao learned meditation in the Theravāda tradition.

“When I went there I didn’t know mahasati dynamic meditation was . . . . Also I didn’t understand meditation well in Theravāda tradition . . . I only knew about worshipping rituals . . . pay efforts, ascetic practices [in Chinese traditions].”

Rongdao recalled that she learnt the meditation practices with a beginner’s mind: “When I should eat, I ate; when I should sleep, I slept. Then on the second day (of the retreat), they started teaching the movement of the arms [of dynamic meditation].”

Dynamic meditation (*dongzhongchan* 動中禪) is a form of vipassanā practice that focuses on bodily movement. It was developed by Luangpor Teean Jittasubho (1911–1988), who regularly practiced with the bodily movements of the arms and abdomen (Lau 2020a). One day, when he was still a layman and householder, he finally experienced enlightenment and the end of suffering. Since then, he re-entered monkhood to teach the people by establishing a few meditation centers in different parts of Thailand.<sup>27</sup> According to the teaching of Luangpor Teean, the practitioner moves the body rhythmically and retains one’s awareness all the time during sitting down, walking and daily life activities. In a seated position with the eyes open, practitioners are instructed to slowly and repeatedly move their arms in fifteen steps: 1. Rest the hands with the palms facing downwards on the thighs; 2. Turn the right hand onto its edge with awareness, then stop; 3. Raise the right hand with awareness, then stop; 4. Lower the right hand to rest on the abdomen, be aware, then stop; . . . 13. Move the left hand out, be aware, then stop; 14. Lower the left hand onto its edge on the thigh, be aware, then stop and 15. Face the left palm downwards, be aware, then stop.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Luangpor Teean suggests that practitioners should practice walking and sitting meditation alternatively. After sitting for a long time, meditators can walk back and forth naturally, with an awareness of the feeling of the feet. Practicing all the time in their daily life is recommended. Luangpor Thong, one of the main disciples of Luangpor Teean, spread the teaching of dynamic meditation by traveling to the West and Chinese societies, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.<sup>29</sup>

Following the instruction of Luangpor Thong, in the following week, Rongdao was able to observe those rigorous mental activities related to past events in her mind. “Those were something that had bothered me. Arising and arising. I listened to dhamma talks of Luangpor Thong in every evening. As he explained, practicing the awareness is just like keeping a cat.” Since she started observing those thoughts with the power of awareness, the mind did not attach to some thoughts as it had usually done so.

“I really can’t learn all these [practices] at Buddhist academy. This awareness can be brought into walking or any daily activities. This is *satipaṭṭhāna* (*sinianzhu* 四念住). There are great insights arisen after reading *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*Nianzhujing* 念住經). Then in the third week, the body and mind became explicitly light . . . it’s good. The mind has become much gentle.”

Rongdao appreciated the practices in Theravāda Buddhist traditions, which are based on Pāli scriptures or the three baskets (*tipiṭaka*), including teachings (*sutta piṭaka*), disciplines (*vinaya piṭaka*) and discourses (*abhidhamma piṭaka*). *The Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness* (*Mahasatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*)<sup>30</sup> and *The Foundations of Mindfulness* (*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*), which explicate mindful practice on four mind–body objects, are recognized as significant teachings on the path to *nibbāna*. From the text, the Buddha told his disciples: “*bhikkhus*, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of *nibbāna*—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.”<sup>31</sup> The four objects of mindfulness include body, feelings, mind and mental objects. Then, how can one practice mindfulness of the four objects? For example, about mindfulness of body, it says:

“And how, *bhikkhus*, does a *bhikkhu* abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a *bhikkhu*, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; have folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, even mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out . . . Again, *bhikkhus*, when walking, a *bhikkhu* understands: ‘I am walking’; when standing,

he understands: ‘I am standing’; when sitting, he understands: ‘I am sitting . . . a bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning . . . ; who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; . . . when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.”<sup>32</sup>

Practicing mindfulness of the body includes bringing awareness to breathing patterns in everyday life, and involves all kinds of daily activities. Practicing mindfulness of feeling is to accept the feeling, no matter whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. Practicing mindfulness of mind is to be aware of the mental state, without attachment or aversion. Practicing mindfulness on mind objects includes contemplating the five hindrances, five aggregates, six bases, seven enlightenment factors and the Four Noble Truths. Practitioners can realize the suffering, the origin of suffering, the end of suffering and the Path. According to *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, when practitioners can diligently practice the four foundations of mindfulness for a period of time, they can attain *nibbāna*.<sup>33</sup>

Rongdao delightfully shared with me her experiences of observing the mind and realizing how the practices can facilitate the harmony of a monastic community. She used to take a serious attitude in every task that, as a result, caused her a lot of anxiety. She recalled the hectic life at the Buddhist academy. Following the curriculum of most Buddhist academies, she practiced precepts and chanting, and worked to care about the physical posture, manner and rules of conduct (*weiyi* 威儀). “We need to keep the back straightly [all the time] when we were chanting or having meals. Those monastics care about their image. Later I reflected that it’s an attachment to the image (*zhuoxiang* 著相).” She was unable to observe rising greed, desires and hatred in a busy daily schedule. When those unpleasant or undesirable feelings arose, she used to suppress them in a very uncomfortable way. Finally, the feelings resulted in conflicts.

“Well, with the tightness of the body, the nerve cells do not relax. When you working on something, you’re trying to perfect it, and hold it, you don’t feel any pain in your body. But when you relax, all these problems arise. Frankly speaking, there was no awareness and awakening. Now when I understand this practice, the body slowly can adjust by itself.”

Rongdao continuously explained that monastics come from diverse backgrounds. Each has her own personality. “You can’t just suppress them. Only practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* that the community can maintain harmony. Otherwise, when she feels unhappy, she just leave [the monastery] on the next day as her mind is so agitated.” As an abbess, Rongdao believed that, from her personal experiences, embodied meditation practices of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) can contribute to the attainment of an ideal of harmony in a monastic community (*liuhejing* 六和敬), from the perspective of monastic management.

From my previous study at Yunshan Monastery, many laywomen found that the *vipassanā* practices in the Theravāda tradition not only could enrich their understanding of Dharma, but could also help them relax and settle daily life issues (Lau 2017). For example, Wen Ling, a forty-five-year-old clerk, felt unwell about her body that had a rapid heartbeat and rigid neck. With awareness, she could observe the changes in the body and mind as a natural phenomenon. She also learned to investigate the reaction of the body and mind. For example, things which rise and fall do not belong to her. With this understanding, the attachment and craving to defilements had been reduced (Lau 2017, p. 330). As this paper argues, the privatized self-healing spiritual experience has become the key motivation for Chinese women traveling to Southeast Asian countries to explore their imagined ideal Dharma and meditation practices (Lau 2020b).

## 5. Chinese Women Traveling to Learn Transnational Meditation in Southeast Asia

Traveling to learn Buddhism is nothing strange to the historical imagination of Chinese people. Most Chinese individuals know about the *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記), a popular novel written in the 16th century.<sup>34</sup> The legendary story focuses on the pilgrimage

of Xuanzang, an eminent Chinese monk in the Tang dynasty, who traveled to India by foot, facing many challenges and hardships to reach important Buddhist scriptures not available in China. However, it had been not easy for Chinese traveling to other countries due to political restriction of the party-state in contemporary China.

Since the opening of China in the 1980s, with the state-directed policy for attracting income from foreign visitors, Wutai Shan, one the largest Buddhist sites in China, became a national scenic spot in 1982. Yet, with the party-state policy, it has not been easy for Chinese citizens traveling to other countries. However, the radical economic transformation in China in the past three decades, which surprised the world, has impacted on Chinese traveling and pilgrimaging to other countries.<sup>35</sup> After turning to the 21st century, with the rapid growth of GDP, the focus of tourism has shifted to national tourism, including domestic and outbound tourism, aimed at upgrading the wellbeing and life quality of people. The change has been part of the recent state development strategic plan.<sup>36</sup> Compared with 2014, domestic tourism in 2015 increased by 10.5 percent and 13.0 percent, respectively, and culminated in 4 billion visitors and RMB 3420 billion. In regard to outbound tourism in 2015, there were 11.7 million departures and the expenditure reached USD 104.5 billion. This was an increase of 9 percent and 16.6 percent, compared with that in 2014.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of the leisure economy has been influenced by general trends in globalization, modernization, urbanization, mobile technology and increasing wealth, as there was a growing demand for wellbeing, healthy lifestyles and a better quality of life. In the second term of 2016, other Asian countries were listed as the top ten popular countries for Chinese outbound tourism, including Thailand, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia.<sup>38</sup>

Ji (2011) argues that the recent trend of Chan fever and Buddhist pilgrims has aroused a lot of interest in the Buddhist revival, but has also commercialized Buddhism to be more materialistic rather than spiritual. The phenomena of over-commercialization of some Chinese Buddhist monasteries and misbehavior were even publicly condemned by a monastic leader from the Buddhist Association of China, the highest official Buddhist organization recognized by the party-state.<sup>39</sup>

Many Chinese Buddhists practiced meditation in Chinese Buddhist traditions, before they traveled to Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka to learn meditation in the Theravāda tradition (Lau 2018). Some of them had a strong interest in Chan practices, but felt doubtful of the practices. With the unsatisfied sentiment of spiritual seeking, some Chinese Buddhists were motivated to start their journey to other Buddhist countries, to explore their imagined ideal Buddhist practices. Seeking the “right” meditation teacher is also one of the main purposes for most devoted spiritual seekers from mainland China.

### 5.1. The Case of Laywoman Yaozhen

Yaozhen, a 30-year-old young lady from Beijing, is a typical case of middle-class Chinese traveling yogis motivated to explore ideal Buddhist meditation teachers and practices (Lau 2018, pp. 84–86). After returning to China from staying at a few meditation centers in Myanmar for a year, Yaozhen published a few articles in 2016, sharing her meditation experiences on her blog on WeChat (*weixin* 微信), the most popular mobile app in mainland China.<sup>40</sup> She posted an article titled “International Prisons” (Yaozhen 2016):

“Having stayed in Myanmar for one year, Yaozhen fortunately has experienced the life of an ‘international prison’. It is rumoured that Burmese ‘international prisons’ are world-known. The number of visitors from various countries has never dropped. People who have been to Myanmar would know where ‘international prisons’ are. Yes, they are world-renowned international meditation centers. Why does Yaozhen say they are ‘international prison’? Let Yaozhen explicate with the meditation centers of U Pandita Sayadaw, Chanmyay Sayadaw and U Tejaniya Sayadaw. A characteristic of Burmese ‘international prisons’: No internet. To most people with modern living, swiping WeChat and sharing in a friends chat group (*pengyouquan* 朋友圈) is a daily activity. Yet if you cannot access to the internet for a few months, what will happen? Those who

firstly arrive at Burmese ‘international prisons’ have to prepare well—an absolute isolation from the world. Certainly there is an exception. Shwe Oo Ming Center is the only place where WiFi access is possible. This is an open ‘secret’ of ‘international prisoners’! U Tejaniya is compassionate to consider the need of ‘international prisoners’ to connect with family members and friends occasionally. . . . However, please consider whether you want to work for early liberation or to stay in ‘international prisons’ for your whole life? [If you] want to cut off defilements as early as possible, please give up all distractions! *Taobao, WeChat, pengyouquan . . .*,<sup>41</sup> leave them behind in China. Many people may ask, what can we receive from meditation? Can [we] become liberated? Can [we] attain the results? Indeed, meditation is ‘cutting off and leaving’ (*duansheli* 斷捨離). You would gain [something] only when you lose [something]. What [you] lose are those unnecessary things, such as defilements, wealth, fame . . . What you can gain? Please come to experience, haha! . . . ”

Apart from the teacher, the living conditions in the meditation centers are frequently discussed amongst Chinese yogis. To most Chinese meditators, the quality of food and accommodation and the weather of the country are important criteria for their travel. Although Yaozhen (2016) was ill from the food and weather, she was also very satisfied with her accommodation: “as an international ‘prisoner’, you have a garden villa, private room, balcony, and bathroom. (Figure 2) Flowers and birds are there outside the window. You also have a mountain view”. Despite many challenges, like many other Chinese laity traveling to Southeast Asia in the past few years, Yaozhen (2016) was proud and amazed with her experience as a yogi staying at international meditation centers in Myanmar, learning from internationally-known teachers. After returning to Beijing, she was invited to share her experiences in regular meditation practice groups. After that, she continued her practices with Living Chan at the Bailing Monastery in Beijing.



**Figure 2.** Accommodation of Shweooming meditation center, Yangon, Myanmar (from Yaozhen’s blog (Yaozhen 2016)).

### 5.2. The Case of Bhikṣuṇī Rongdao

In order to deepen the practice of the mahasati dynamic tradition, with four other Chinese *Bhikṣuṇī* from mainland China, *Bhikṣuṇī* Rongdao traveled to Thailand, staying at Wa Pa Sukato in 2015 for two weeks, a branch meditation center at Khonkean. Rongdao recalled the impressive meditation experiences:

“... It’s so comfortable, with natural spirit and body ... full of energy ... every morning I woke up at about three naturally. The mind was so clear and the body was sensitive, unlike being here that sometimes with heavy sense of the body. Walking on the path in the village in the evening, I could see some small snails with the dimmed lights. Everything is so close to the nature ... ”

With the invitation of Candasaro, a Chinese monk who was ordained in the tradition of Wat Pa Sukato, I firstly visited there in the summer of 2016. Located in the Chaiphum Province, the temple covers an area of 185 acres, including a river and a mountain that is 470 m above sea level. Sukato means “good”. Luang Phor Kham Khian Suwanno<sup>42</sup>, the first abbot, shared his intention of building the temple:

“Sukato is a place where people come and go for wellness, also for the beneficial impact of the environment, human beings, river, forest and air. This is the wellness in coming, going and being. This wellness is born from earth, water, air and fire, not from one person alone ... There is shelter, food and friends who will teach, demonstrate, and give advice. Should one wish to stay here, his or her intention to practice *Dharma* shall be fulfilled.”<sup>43</sup>

As there were plenty of meditation huts called *kuti*, every resident could stay in one *kuti*. Every morning, all the residents woke up at 3 o’clock in the morning to prepare for the chanting and *Dhamma* talk at 4 o’clock. Around 6 am, monks dressed in yellow monastic robes formally visited villages nearby, carrying their alms bowls for their daily alms round. In Chinese Buddhist communities in China, alms round practices have been abandoned for many centuries. Out of curiosity, other foreign lay people and I attended the alms round, following the monks who, with bare feet, were walking in a tidy queue towards the village. In this vast forest temple, there were only around 30 monks and 30 lay people during my visit. Among them, there were twelve Chinese individuals from mainland China, including monks, nuns and lay people, practicing at Sukato. (Figure 3) With the ideal conditions of practicing meditation, it can be understood why Rongdao was so grateful for the opportunity to travel to Thailand for the practice: “The experience in Thailand was absolutely a big leap [of the spiritual practice]!”<sup>44</sup> This traveling experience may have facilitated the determination of Rongdao in establishing halls in both Chan and transnational traditions, after she returned to China.



**Figure 3.** Some Chinese nuns and laywomen visited and stayed at Wat Pa Sukato at Khonkean in Thailand (Photo taken by the author).

### 5.3. The Case of Precept Nun Khema

Khema is another case that surprised me in my study. When I first met her at Yunfeng Monastery 雲峰寺 at Suzhou in the winter of 2015, she was a 66-year-old eight precept nun.

It was about zero degrees Celsius. Khema was a key volunteer assisting Bhikṣu Chengfeng 成峰, a famous Chinese monk, organizing *vipassanā* meditation retreats. I recalled that Khema was dressed in Han Chinese laywoman's clothes, but with her hair shaved off. It is not a usual appearance in the Chinese Buddhist context. Out of my curiosity, I asked her about this. She said, with a firm tone: "I have observed the eight precepts strictly [with a strong faith] in my mind although it was difficult to be understood by many others".

Khema was interested in Chan meditation before she encountered Theravāda meditation from a few Chinese *bhikṣus* in Suzhou in 2009. Yet, she could not find a proper Chan meditation master. She learnt *vipassanā* meditation instead of Chan. A few monks from Suzhou traveled to Myanmar learning *vipassanā* from Burmese meditation masters. Despite the lack of education in English, Khema visited Yangon to stay at the Mahāsi international meditation center for 66 days in 2012, with the support of a local Chinese translator. "The only terms I could say was 'how much' and 'something' in English", Khema told me. She used her body language to communicate with the local Burmese people. Some volunteers at the meditation center would arrange a taxi driver to send her to the nearby airport. Khema recalled gratefully: "it was a life-turning experience to me. . . . U Jatila Sayadaw was a very skillful teacher. He taught me how to be mindful of the body sensations." That explained that why she remembered that the duration of her first stay at Myanmar was 66 days. As she recalled, U Jatila taught her about observing the contact points of the four elements (*sida* 四大), labeling and contemplation in the Mahāsi tradition.

In 2013 and 2014, Khema returned to Yangon and stayed at the same meditation center, again for half a year. With a strong determination, Khema decided to take the eight precepts for as long as she could in her life. When Khema returned to China, she did not dress like a Burmese Sayalay (nun in Myanmar) in pink and orange colors.

"I did tell Sayadaw about the difficult situation in China. He was fine for what I dressed in when I returned to China. It's difficult and impossible to dress like that in China, especially at a Han Chinese Monastery! The dress also did not suit the climate in China."

Unlike the situation in Southeast Asian countries, where the lineage of *bhikkhunī* tradition is lost, in mainland China, as well as in many Chinese societies, there exists the tradition of the dual ordination ceremony. There is no doubt that woman would ordain as *bhikṣuṇī*, as one of the four assemblies in the Buddhist family described in canon. In other words, Buddhist women are either *bhikṣuṇīs* or *lays*. Hence, eight precept nuns would be seen as a strange category and identity in the Chinese Buddhist context. Furthermore, with the intervention of the party-state of Buddhist institutions in mainland China, eight-precept nuns or *bhikkhu* from the Theravāda tradition can create a threat to the orthodoxy of the Mahāyāna Chinese Buddhism promoted by the state.<sup>45</sup> The great determination of Khema to keep the eight precepts in a Chinese Buddhist monastery in mainland China is a rare case found in my fieldwork. Nevertheless, it was not unusual that Chinese women from Taiwan and mainland China were ordained as short-term eight or ten precept nuns at meditation centers in Thailand or Myanmar, and disrobed before returning to China.

In summary, from the cases of the laywoman Yaozhen, Bhikṣuṇī Rongdao and precept nun Khema, despite difficulty of language communication, food and weather, in the past decade, there have been hundreds Chinese nuns and laywomen traveling to Southeast Asia, learning various transnational meditation practices solely for spiritual seeking and practicing Dharma.<sup>46</sup> In spite of the denial of access to Chan halls at monasteries, Chinese women in contemporary China have engaged in transnational meditation as precept nuns or laywomen as alternatives. The skillful teachings of embodied practices by experienced meditation teachers, and the ideal physical environment of practicing meditation in individual rooms have been attractive to Chinese female meditators to travel to learn the practices in meditation centers in Southeast Asia, despite the challenges related to language barriers, diet, danger and visa application. More importantly, as I have discussed in the previous Sections, the early Buddhist texts and recent cases of enlightenment have demonstrated that women, as much as men, are able to attain full liberation through practicing meditation

in the Theravāda tradition. All these concepts have motivated those who returned to China to set up not only transnational meditation groups or organizing meditation retreats, but also Chan halls solely for females at Buddhist nunneries.

## 6. Establishing Transnational Meditation Centers, Public Chan Halls and Female Chan Halls at Nunneries

After returning to China, many Chinese yogis, including monastics and lay people, shared their experiences with friends in their meditation communities. In the past decade, these practitioners, including men and women, showed their endeavor to “transplant” the transnational meditation experience from Myanmar or Thailand into their community in China, and created an imagined sacred space spreading their favorite teachings, through networking, organizing regular practice groups (*gongxiudian* 共修點), fund raising and even establishing new meditation centers in mainland China. The existing transnational meditation activities in contemporary China can be categorized into four main models: (a) retreats in one tradition held at Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries; (b) retreats in various traditions held at Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries; (c) the Theravāda Buddhist community and (d) meditation or mindfulness retreats in secular spaces (Lau 2020b).<sup>47</sup> More surprisingly, some public Chan halls at monasteries and female Chan halls at nunneries have gradually been established to meet the increasing needs of female meditators.

For the first model, for example, a *vipassanā* meditation center established at Nanchan Monastery, is a Buddhist nunnery presenting the effort of a *bhikṣuṇī*. From my fieldwork, the first ten-day retreat of Goenka’s *vipassanā* in mainland China was held in 1999, in Bailin Monastery in Hebei Province, with the initiation of Yeung Hung, a Hong Kong businessman and devout Buddhist.<sup>48</sup> It attracted a few hundred monastics and lay Buddhists to join.<sup>49</sup> After that, with the support of meditators from Taiwan and Hong Kong, ten-day *vipassanā* courses were organized at monasteries or public venues, such as resort centers in different parts of the country, including in the provinces of Guangdong 廣東, Fujian 福建 and Liaoning 遼寧. Nevertheless, public venues were not ideal for organizing *vipassanā* retreats, with the restriction of the party-state religious policy.<sup>50</sup> Some retreats were interrupted by local party cadres with the doubt of suspected “heretical” religious activity. Later, the first *vipassanā* meditation center in China was formally established in 2013, at Nanchan Monastery (*nanchan si* 南禪寺)<sup>51</sup>, the biggest Buddhist nunnery in the western Fujian Province, by the effort of an ex-abbess, Bhikṣuṇī Puli. New buildings with meditation halls and accommodation were built in a separate area next to the monastery. In 2017, there were over six centers regularly organizing *vipassanā* meditation retreats in mainland China, which are located at Xiamen, Gansu and Liaoning, Sichuan, Qingdao and Inner Mongolia.<sup>52</sup>

For the first model, there is another case involving a Chinese Buddhist nun. A meditation center of the mahasati *vipassanā* tradition was also established by Bhikṣuṇi Xuzhi. Since the late 1990s, translated books about mahasati practices have been circulated in mainland China. In 2000, bhikṣuṇi Xuzhi read about books on *mahasati* meditation at Wenshuyuan 文殊苑 in Sichuan 四川.<sup>53</sup> She visited Luangpor Thong in Bangkok in 2006, and invited him to mainland China to organize the first *mahasati* meditation retreat in Sichuan Province, in June 2007. Moreover, Yansong 岩松, a lay person was also involved in organizing retreats, by inviting Achan Khamkhian from Thailand. Since 2007, over fifty-seven day retreats have been organized at Han Buddhist monasteries in different parts of China, including Fujian, Sichuan and Hunan Province. It is estimated that more than 5000 Chinese monastics and lay people have joined retreats of this tradition.<sup>54</sup> A stable meditation center as regular practice group was established by Xuzhi at Shifo Monastery (*shifosi* 石佛寺) in Sichuan in 2016 (Bianchi n.d.; Lau 2020a). A website for the Mahasati Dynamic Meditation Center (*Zhengnian dongzhongchan zhongxin* 正念動中禪中心) was established for advertising updated retreats, registration and fund raising.<sup>55</sup> A transnational network has been built, along with other *mahasati* meditation centers in Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

Interestingly, in mainland China, *mahasati* meditation practice has been interpreted by Xuzhi as a lineage of Chan, to make a connection with Chinese Buddhism. As mentioned

by Rongdao in the previous Section, Luangpor Thong uses the cat and rat as an analogy for mindfulness and passing thoughts, to encourage meditators to diligently cultivate mindfulness. When the cat, as mindfulness, can be cultivated strong enough, it can catch the rat, as those defilements, and finally be liberated. This metaphor is named as a new Chan koan (*gongan* 公案) of “the cat of Luang Por” (*longbomao* 隆波), which follows the other four famous Chan koan in medieval China: “the biscuit of Yunmen” (*yunmenbing* 雲門餅), “the tea of Zhaozhou” (*zhaozhoucha* 趙州茶), “the scold of Linji” (*linjihe* 臨濟喝) and “the stick of Deshan” (*deshanbang* 德山棒).<sup>56</sup> Moreover, a photo of Xuzhi working in the field at Shifosi was posted on the Mahasati Dynamic Meditation Center website, emulating the spirit of the ancient Chan master of “no working one day, no eating one day” (一日不作一日不食) (Figure 4). It tries to imply that practicing *dongzhongchan* does not greatly differ from Chan in the Han Chinese Buddhist tradition. It can also be one of the common features developed for adaptation in the contemporary Chinese context—a hybridity of the transnational and Chinese Buddhist style, due to the restriction of the socio-political situation, as I argue in my previous study (Lau 2020a, 2021b).



**Figure 4.** Bhisuni Xuzhi was working in the field as a farming Chan (*nongchan* 農禪). (Taken from the Mahasati Dynamic Meditation Center website).

Apart from the increasing number of meditation retreats and sites of transnational meditation, it was surprising to find the establishment of public Chan halls at monasteries and female Chan halls at nunneries. Despite the restriction of Chinese women accessing the *chantang* at monasteries in China, venues called “public Chan hall” (*gonggong chantang* 公共禪堂) or “Chan hall for the four assemblies” (*sizhong chantang* 四眾禪堂) have been established so that nuns and laywomen can gain access for practicing Chan.

The Chan hall for the public at Gaomin Monastery 高旻寺, located at Yangzhou 揚州, may be the most famous and successful one in contemporary China.<sup>57</sup> Since Gaomin Monastery began its revival in 1983, the 70-year-old abbot, Master Delin 德林 (1914–2015), a disciple of Laiguo 來果 (Liu 2020), has not only reconstructed the monastery main buildings, including the Chan hall, but also opened the Chan hall to nuns and women for meditation practice, unlike many other Chan monasteries. It is said that this follows the practice of Laiguo, when he was the abbot in the Republican period. While most traditional Chan halls are rectangular in shape, the new Chan hall of Gaomin Monastery, funded by a Hong Kong Buddhist, is octagonal in shape (Liu 2019, p. 136). In the Linji 臨濟 Chan Dharma tradition, for forty-seven generations, the yearly key event at Gaomin Monastery is organizing seven-day Chan retreats (*dachanqi* 打禪七). There are normally twelve seven-day

Chan retreats over the winter retreat (*donganju* 冬安居) period, for nearly three months (Liu 2019, p. 134). During the Chan retreat period, there are eleven sessions from 4.30 in the morning. Every meditator should stay in the meditation hall for sitting meditation, walking meditation and listening to Dharma talk, except for two sessions for having breakfast and lunch in the dining hall. During my visit in the winters of 2006 and 2007, there were over three hundred people joining the winter retreat, with over 70% nuns and laywomen.<sup>58</sup> The Chan hall is quite large and can accommodate 560 people during the peak time (Liu 2019, p. 137). The winter retreat at Gaomin has attracted not only nuns and laywomen from different parts of China, but also some foreign visitors.

From her fieldwork, Liu (2019, pp. 140–43) pointed out that although there were strict rules at the Chan hall, the permission requirement for participation was not clear. Even a monk from the Gaomin monastery commented that not so many people are able to practice *huotouchan* 話頭禪 or *kanhuachan* 看話禪, the practice of an internal investigation of a key phrase through mindful concentration: “who is reciting the Buddha? (*nianfo shishei* 念佛是誰)”.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, many Chinese monks could not understand the traditional Chan practices.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, some people, probably monks, criticized the practices of males and females practicing Chan at the same physical space, stating that they may have violated rules of the Chan tradition.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that the lack of knowledge about Chan practice has not stopped the establishment of the “four assemblies Chan hall” at a few historical monasteries in contemporary China, such as Nanhua Monastery 南華寺, Yunmen Monastery 雲門寺 and Baofeng Monastery 寶峰寺, although the official Chan halls have still been kept for monks and laymen only.<sup>62</sup>

If monks keep Chan halls for their use at monasteries, it is quite reasonable to establish Chan halls at nunneries for the increasing needs of Chinese women. The revival of the Chan tradition and re-establishment of the buildings at Baoji Monastery in the past few years, as a Buddhist nunnery in Jiangxi, has been supported by the government, with the financial support from entrepreneur Mr. Yeung in Hong Kong.<sup>63</sup> Originally built in 870 A.D. in Tang dynasty by Master Benji 本寂, Baoji Monastery has kept its Chan tradition as Caodong 曹洞. Since Bhikṣuṇī Yangli 養立<sup>64</sup> has succeeded as the fiftieth generation of the Caodong sect and abbess, she established the female Chan hall and Buddhist Academy in 2017 as an “orthodox” model of the Chan Buddhist nunnery, promoted by the government.<sup>65</sup>

With an invitation from Rongdao, I visited Baolian Chan Monastery in Jiangxi, the first Chan nunnery I knew in contemporary China. Originally established in the Ming Dynasty by villagers for keeping peace at a spiritual small mountain at Hefeng Town 和豐鎮, Peace Temple 太平庵 has been a place for some visiting monks to stay. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Bhikṣu Jiguang 繼光, a senior monk at Nanhua Monastery and an ex-villager, re-established the abolished temple as Baolian Chan Monastery, later Lianhua Chan Monastery. Just like many other monasteries, it conducts several daily practices, including morning services, evening services and having meals (*guotong*). However, the most striking thing is that they have a Chan hall (*chantang*) only run by nuns. When I stayed there in December 2016, Bhikṣuṇī Rondao, the abbess, kindly showed me the newly renovated three-level building. The first level was built as a traditional Chan hall (*chantang*) for practicing Chan (Figures 5 and 6). Like many traditional *chantang*, it was square-shaped with meditation seats arranged in front of the walls. A maximum of 40 people could practice Chan together at the same time. As Rongdao told me, Bhikṣu Yanzhen, a well-respected Chan master in China, gave advice about the proper construction and routine chores of the *chantang*. The *chantang*, which is now in the tradition of Linzhi, is open daily for seven Chan sessions, and is supported by two nuns, Bhikṣuṇī Yanhui and Khema, who ring the gong and guard them with regulations. Since I left Yunfeng Monastery, I did not meet Khema again. As Bhikṣu Chengfeng disrobed and returned to lay life in 2016, Khema left Suzhou and traveled to explore suitable monasteries by joining meditation retreats. After meeting Rongdao, Khema finally came to Baolian Monastery to support the daily routine chores at the *chantang*. I was delighted that Khema, who insisted on her status as an eight precept nun, could settle at a nunnery in the Chan tradition.



**Figure 5.** The female Chan hall at Baolian Chan Monastery (taken by the author).



**Figure 6.** The essential tools of the convener (weino shifu 維那師父) of the Chan hall, Baolian Chan Monastery (taken by the author).

In summary, the widespread popularity of transnational meditation has created impacts on establishing transnational meditation centers in mainland China, by returned travelers. Chinese women have not only made an effort to organize regular meditation retreats, but also raised funds to establish meditation centers, for example, the *vipassanā* meditation center set up by Bhikṣuṇī Puli at Nanchan Monastery in Fujian and the mahasati dynamic meditation center by Bhikṣuṇī Xuzhi at Shifo Monastery. Furthermore, the public Chan halls or four-assembly Chan halls at monasteries, for example, one at Gaomin Monastery, have provided chances for hundreds of Chinese nuns and laywomen to practice Chan. The establishment of female Chan halls at nunneries can reflect that women are encouraged to practice Chan in the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context.

## 7. Conclusions

The present paper examined how the Buddhist revival, Chan revival and recent popularity of transnational meditation practices have facilitated Chinese women practicing Buddhist meditation in contemporary China. Since the 2010s, Chinese nuns and women

have been actively participating in learning and importing transnational meditation retreats, including the teachings of various Theravāda traditions and secular mindfulness programs. With the fact that Chinese women are denied access to Chan halls of monasteries in contemporary China, it is intriguing to explore the Buddhist texts and historical materials related to the spiritual potential of women. By examining the Buddhist texts in the Theravāda tradition, women are presented as “both marginal and indispensable” in the Pāli text (Engelmajer 2015, p. 114). Buddhist women were expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, as the spiritual agency for nurturing monks and supporting Sangha, before they can join the Sangha in their latest stages of life. Furthermore, *bhikkhunis* have slightly lower achievements than the *bhikkhus* in the Buddhist community. In the Mahāyāna tradition, women are treated as inferior compared to the Chinese culture, following the Three Dependencies. Nevertheless, in both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna tradition, women are capable of attaining the same spiritual achievement as men. The example of the Nāga-girl expresses both the inequality and equality of spiritual development among women. From the history of China, there exist eminent female Chan masters and practitioners. In the contemporary context, some female renunciators, such as Mae Chi Kaew and Dipa Ma, in Thailand and Myanmar have showed a successful picture of the spiritual achievement of Buddhist women.

By investigating the recent revival of Chinese Buddhism and Chan fever after the opening of China, and my recent ethnographic studies in China, I have demonstrated how Chinese nuns and laywomen, such as Bhikṣuṇī Rongdao, Bhikṣuṇī Xuzhi and Yaozhen, have been inspired by the transnational meditation in Theravāda traditions about the equal opportunities of spiritual achievement. Despite the denial of access to the Chan halls in most monasteries in mainland China, many Chinese nuns and laywomen have contributed to the promotion of meditation practices by establishing meditation centers and Chan halls. Despite the restriction of accessing Chan halls at monasteries, Chinese nuns and laywomen in contemporary China have strived to gain equal opportunities in their spiritual development in meditation practices, with the inspiration of practicing transnational meditation. For example, not only have new transnational meditation centers and networks been built, but also have public Chan halls at monasteries and female Chan halls at nunneries, such as Baolian Monastery, with the effort of four disciples, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. Overall, I have argued that the transnational meditation movement in mainland China has had an impact on the gender equality issues concerning the practice of meditation by Chinese women.

Nevertheless, as can be observed from my fieldwork, Chinese laywomen who were ordained in the Theravāda tradition in Southeast Asian countries, would normally disrobe when they returned to China. Most Chinese nuns, such as Xuzhi and Rongdao, would not change their robes to the Theravāda traditions, although they have benefitted from the meditation practices in Theravāda traditions. As discussed in the previous Section, Xuzhi attempted to synthesize mahasati vipassanā meditation from the Thai tradition into traditional Chan practice, by using the metaphor of koan: “the cat of Luang Por”. She also emphasized that practicing *dongzhongchan* does not greatly differ from Chan in the Han Chinese tradition. The attempt of adapting transnational meditation in the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context as a hybrid way, can be due to the restrictions of the socio-political situation in China. The hybridity of transnational meditation and Chan is also found in another recent ethnographic study of a meditation retreat in Gengxiang Monastery in Southern China. Targeting non-Buddhist Chinese with depression, two Han Chinese Buddhist monks promoted a hybrid mode of the vipassanā meditation retreat. Instead of a serious and intensive meditation camp, the eight-day retreat held at a Chan monastery was composed of secular mindfulness practices, such as a three-minute breathing space, and psychoanalytic exercises, such as inner child for healing depression (see Lau 2021b). Instead of a strict attitude, a gentle client-center counselling approach was practiced at group interviews, to allow the participants to share their own embodied experiences and challenges. As Kim Knott argues, more people choose to “turn to the self” and individualize

their religious experiences. As McMahan (2008) explains, with recourse to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, with the rise of Romantic, psychological and rationalist influences since the nineteenth century, one's own experience has become an explicit object of reflection as a "subjective turn". This renders the trend of detraditionalization and privatization of Buddhist meditation after the encounter with Western modernity (pp. 183–92). In the discussion of Goenka and his movement of promoting vipassanā to the world in a secular, scientific and decontextualized approach, McMahan (2020, p. 47) uses the phrase, "de-religioning of meditation". On the contrary, in the case of including secular mindfulness into a vipassanā meditation retreat, it can be perceived as "re-religioning meditation" and re-contextualizing in Chinese Buddhism, as an active response from Chinese Buddhist communities towards the yearning for self-healing mind-body practices and the social trend of the "subjective turn" in contemporary China (Lau 2021b, pp. 20–21). I argue that the case of Xuzhi in promoting a hybrid mode of mahasati vipassanā meditation and Chan is a response of re-contextualizing vipassanā meditation in Chan practices.

Overall, the unique development of Chinese Buddhism in the socio-political context can help explain the religious phenomenon in contemporary China. As discussed previously, over the Buddhist revival in the Republican period, Taixu and his followers strived to promote the Mahāyāna Chinese Buddhist tradition. Learning from other traditions is a way of enriching Chinese Buddhism with its rich heritage. Chan has been one of the iconic schools developed in Chinese Buddhism. With the intervention of the party-state in religious development since the opening in contemporary China, re-establishing the Chan school can be seen as part of the representative "orthodoxy" of Chinese Buddhism to be promoted to other countries. Furthermore, from the case of Yangli and the Baoji Monastery, re-establishing and promoting Chan can be a diplomatic credit in the interaction with other East Asian countries, especially Japan and Korea. Learning from the contemporary situation of gender equality in accessing Buddhist meditation in Southeast Asia and the West, it is certain that the official Buddhist organizations would support Chinese nuns and laywomen to practice Chan by establishing female Chan halls at Buddhist nunneries, for example, the establishment of Baolian Chan Monastery by *Bhikṣuṇī* Rongdao and Baoji Monastery by *Bhikṣuṇī* Yangli.

In conclusion, by exploring the recent development of the Chan revival and transnational meditation in contemporary China, I argue that the transnational meditation movement significantly influenced the active participation of Chinese Buddhist nuns and laywomen in enhancing equal access to practice Buddhist meditation, including *vipassanā* and Chan. The significant leading role of Chinese Buddhist nuns in the Chan revival may be a joining force of the trend of re-positioning the Chan School in the Chinese Buddhist context, with the support of the official Buddhist organizations and the socio-political agenda of the party-state.

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## Abbreviations

DN Dīgha Nikāya (Long Length Discourses of the Buddha)  
 MN Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha)

## Notes

- 1 Yunshan Monastery is a pseudo name in this study. Most names of my informants in this paper are pseudo for protecting their identities.
- 2 Vipassanā or ‘insight meditation’ is a contemporary form of meditation modernized by Ledi Sayadaw, a Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher in Burma (Braun 2013).
- 3 In this paper, Chan hall refers to the traditional meditation hall of the Chan School (*Chan zong* 禪宗).
- 4 Sayadaw U Tejaniya is called as Deshi 德師 by Chinese followers. Sayadaw (B. ဆရာတော်) means royal teacher in Burmese. More details about U Tejaniya, see <http://ashintejaniya.org/teachings/> (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 5 Theravāda, which means literally “Doctrine of the Elders”, refers to the teachings collected after the death of Gautama Buddha. It was one of the earlier schools that spread from India to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and other Southeast Asian countries, such as Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand. The use of Pāli, which means “canonical text”, and Pāli scriptures are generally hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Theravāda Nowadays Buddhism is actively supported by the modern states with major population in many Southeast Asian countries.
- 6 Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged in India with new kinds of literature around the common era. The phrase “Thus I have heard” was added at the beginning of the Mahāyāna texts to claim the status of the word of the Buddha (Gethin 1998, pp. 56–65). Mahāyāna Buddhist followers consider that the Mahāyāna texts were taught by the Buddha. Mahāyāna texts were translated from Prakrit and original Sanskrit into Chinese or Tibetan. Mahāyāna flourished exclusively in East Asia with many newly developed schools (Gethin 1998, pp. 224–25). Mahāyāna, which means the “great vehicle”, which is the path of Bodhisattva leading to full enlightenment. In Mahāyāna tradition, it is believed that all beings can practice the path of a Bodhisattva to realize their own Buddha nature, which is the highest value.
- 7 About the flourishing of various Theravāda Buddhist meditation in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, see Lau (2020b, pp. 114–18). Transnational Buddhist meditation teachings of various teachers, including Buddhadasa and Luang Por Thong from Thailand, and Mahāsi Sayadaw and Pa-Auk Sayadaw from Myanmar, have been spread to Chinese societies (see Lau 2021a).
- 8 This paper is based on materials collected from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in China, by visiting meditation communities in different parts of China, including Guangzhou, Jiangxi, Xishuangbanna, Beijing, Suzhou, and Shanghai between September 2014 and December 2019. Even though the focus of my research was in mainland China, I travelled to Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar, to attend Theravāda meditation activities to make reference of those in China. For instance, after an interview with Rongdao in Jiangxi, I decided to visit the meditation centre in Thailand and Biaolian Monastery to follow her life story. I also visited Chan monasteries and attended Chan retreats in Chinese Buddhist monasteries in China in order to compare them with Theravāda meditation activities held in different places.
- 9 It is generally understood that the influences of Buddhism had diminished over the dynasties after Tang, despite there were occasional revival with the support of the state in Ming dynasty (1368–1644).
- 10 As I argue, Taixu confirmed his goal of expanding Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, instead of replacing it by other traditions. For details, see Lau (2020b).
- 11 As Ji (2011) comments, Buddhism has been popularized, but also commercialized over the ‘Chan fever’.
- 12 It is well informed that Master Foyuan 佛源 had suffered physical harm from the exploitation during his labour work over the Cultural Revolution.
- 13 It was estimated that over 5600 laymen and laywomen joining the “life Chan summer camp” in the past few decades.
- 14 Baidu.com [https://www.baidu.com/s?ie=utf-8&f=8&rsv\\_bp=1&rsv\\_idx=1&t=baidu&wd=%E5%85%A7%E8%A7%80%E7%A6%AA%E4%BF%AE&fenlei=256&oq=%25E5%2585%25A7%25E8%25A7%2580%25E7%25A6%25AA%25E4%25BF%25AE%25E6%2586%2582%25E9%25AC%25B1&rsv\\_pq=a3fafc1d00016a76&rsv\\_t=a5fen1UAG1K7xyZyg2cqpAB64O1uYdSc2VIU%2B6nh1LQUvjkkQTW0%2B77WZkU&rqlang=cn&rsv\\_enter=0&rsv\\_dl=tb&rsv\\_btype=t&inputT=720&rsv\\_sug3=46&rsv\\_sug1=25&rsv\\_sug7=100&rsv\\_sug2=0&rsv\\_sug4=1257&rsv\\_sug=2](https://www.baidu.com/s?ie=utf-8&f=8&rsv_bp=1&rsv_idx=1&t=baidu&wd=%E5%85%A7%E8%A7%80%E7%A6%AA%E4%BF%AE&fenlei=256&oq=%25E5%2585%25A7%25E8%25A7%2580%25E7%25A6%25AA%25E4%25BF%25AE%25E6%2586%2582%25E9%25AC%25B1&rsv_pq=a3fafc1d00016a76&rsv_t=a5fen1UAG1K7xyZyg2cqpAB64O1uYdSc2VIU%2B6nh1LQUvjkkQTW0%2B77WZkU&rqlang=cn&rsv_enter=0&rsv_dl=tb&rsv_btype=t&inputT=720&rsv_sug3=46&rsv_sug1=25&rsv_sug7=100&rsv_sug2=0&rsv_sug4=1257&rsv_sug=2) (accessed on 6 December 2021).
- 15 There are 91,700,000 search results of the Chinese term mindfulness (*zhengnian* 正念) on baidu.com [https://www.baidu.com/s?ie=utf-8&f=8&rsv\\_bp=1&rsv\\_idx=1&t=baidu&wd=%E6%AD%A3%E5%BF%B5&fenlei=256&oq=%25E6%25AD%25A3%25E5%25BF%25B5%25E7%25A6%25AA%25E4%25BF%25AE&rsv\\_pq=9f3816ed0008ca53&rsv\\_t=85d1k73An8yvvn8MW5pAJJHjg%2BoU3LzSrIYM%2BKxMVIgIqNTpfiYDc%2B3L0s&rqlang=cn&rsv\\_dl=tb&rsv\\_enter=1&rsv\\_btype=t&inputT=243&rsv\\_sug3=13&rsv\\_sug1=10&rsv\\_sug7=100&rsv\\_sug2=0&rsv\\_sug4=1167&rsv\\_sug=1](https://www.baidu.com/s?ie=utf-8&f=8&rsv_bp=1&rsv_idx=1&t=baidu&wd=%E6%AD%A3%E5%BF%B5&fenlei=256&oq=%25E6%25AD%25A3%25E5%25BF%25B5%25E7%25A6%25AA%25E4%25BF%25AE&rsv_pq=9f3816ed0008ca53&rsv_t=85d1k73An8yvvn8MW5pAJJHjg%2BoU3LzSrIYM%2BKxMVIgIqNTpfiYDc%2B3L0s&rqlang=cn&rsv_dl=tb&rsv_enter=1&rsv_btype=t&inputT=243&rsv_sug3=13&rsv_sug1=10&rsv_sug7=100&rsv_sug2=0&rsv_sug4=1167&rsv_sug=1) (accessed on 6 December 2021).
- 16 Kabat-Zinn (2011), a molecular biologist and a practitioner of Hatha yoga and Korean Zen, developed the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts in 1979. The effectiveness of MBSR in reducing symptoms of stress and psychosomatic diseases has aroused increasing research interest in mindfulness and other diseases (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013). Another successful case is the development of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) by clinical psychologists Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal. MBCT is recognized by National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) as an effective practice for preventing depression relapse in the UK.<sup>12</sup> The application of mindfulness program in a clinical context has popularized mindfulness meditation in counselling centers, schools, prisons, workplaces and even the military in the West.

- 17 From the schedule on the website, it is estimated that at least 8400 Chinese people completing a retreat at the six centers every year (see Lau 2018, pp. 149–51). The number may not be collected for those retreats held at hotels or other secular venues.
- 18 For example, since 2007, from the webpage, over fifty seven-day retreats in mahasati vipassanā meditation retreats have been organised at Han Buddhist monasteries in different parts of China, including Fujian, Sichuan and Hunan Province. It is estimated that more than 5000 Chinese monastics and lay people joining retreats of this tradition (see Lau 2018, pp. 157–58).
- 19 It is not easy to estimate the number of participants joining meditation or mindfulness programs in secular venues as the data is not collected by the officials. For examples, among the over 200 participants in a seven-day MBSR training conducted by Kabat-Zinn in November 2013, there were three Chinese monks.
- 20 The Five Obstacles is mentioned in Pali texts, for example, *Majjhima-nikāya*, *Anguttara-nikāya*, and Mahāyāna texts, such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論. For details, see Faure (2003, p. 349)
- 21 Therīgāthā, v. 7 in “The Female in Buddhism” (Harris 1999, p. 58).
- 22 *Chanyuan qingui* (Rules of Purity at Chan Monastery) has been treated by modern scholars as the oldest example of indigenous Chinese monastic regulations styled “rules of purity”. However, Foulk (2003) argues that both were common heritage of the Chinese Buddhist tradition during Song and Yuan instead of an early invention of Chan master Baizhang 百丈 (749–814).
- 23 A best-selling biography of Longlian Today’s Preeminent Nun: The biography of Dharma Master Longlian (Dangdai diyi biqiuni: Longlian Fashi zhuan 當代第一比丘尼隆蓮法師) was published in 1997 in mainland China, see Grant (2003, pp. 157–59).
- 24 According to Collins and McDaniel (2010), bhikkhūnī-s existed in India and Sri Lanka until the end of the first millennium AD. Yet it is a general mystery about the diminishing number of bhikkhūnī-s in India and Sri Lanka.
- 25 From the interview (Engler 2004), Dipa Ma disclosed that “My journey is not over. There is still work to be done.” She refers the work as ‘greed, hatred and delusion’. Hence, it is evidenced that she had not attained the fruit of *anāgāmi*, which eliminates all greed and hatred.
- 26 See the website of the Insight Meditation Society. Available online: <https://www.dharma.org/> (accessed on 14 October 2021).
- 27 He disrobed after joining the monastic community, but ordained again as a monk at the age of twenty for six months. He disrobed again and was married at twenty-two, and later had three sons. For details, see <http://www.mahasati.org/dmteean.htm> (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 28 The teachings of Luang Por Teean, <http://mahasatimeditation.org/> (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 29 About the details of spreading Mahasati dynamic meditation to Taiwan, can see Lau (2020a), and the website of Mahasati Insight Meditation Association, <http://mahasatimeditation.org/> (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 30 DN Dīgha Nikāya (Long Length Discourses of the Buddha) 22.
- 31 MN Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha) 10.
- 32 MN Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha) 10.
- 33 The period of time depends on the conditions of practitioners, such as the seven enlightenment factors. From *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, it is said that the shortest period of time in attaining nibbāna is seven days.
- 34 *The Journey to the West* is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. Arthur Waley has translated it as the book *Monkey*. The novel has been edited and reprinted many times for adults and children in the past few decades. A few films have been produced in Hong Kong since the 1980s.
- 35 China has had the fastest growing economy in the world in the past three decades with a sustaining growth of real gross domestic product (GDP) at average annual rate of 10.2 percent in the 1980s. From 1990 to 1996, the average annual growth rate of GDP was 12.3 percent. China also had the highest industrial growth rate and the second-highest growth in services. See Guthrie (2009, p. xiii-26).
- 36 For example, there is a strategy of focusing on developing tourism resources and improving the tourism service system. See “院于加快展旅游的意 [The state council’s opinions about accelerating the development of tourism industries],” [http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2009-12/03/content\\_1479523.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2009-12/03/content_1479523.htm) (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 37 “2015年中旅游公” [China tourism statistical bulletin 2015], China National Tourism Administration 中人民共和家旅游局, [http://zwggk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202012/t20201204\\_906456.html](http://zwggk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202012/t20201204_906456.html) (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 38 “家旅游局于2016年第二季度全旅行社查情的公” [National Tourism Administration tourist agency survey statistical bulletin in the second term of 2016], China National Tourism Administration 中人民共和家旅游局, [http://zwggk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202012/t20201204\\_906454.html](http://zwggk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202012/t20201204_906454.html) (accessed on 18 October 2018).
- 39 “中國佛協副會長斥佛界邪惡風氣” [The vice-president of Buddhist Association of China condemns ‘evil culture’ in Buddhist community], *China News*, 10 November 2015, <http://www.hkna.hk/content/2015/1110/411173.shtml> (accessed on 18 October 2018).
- 40 WeChat, invented in 2010, is a mobile app emulating most functions of Facebook. Internet and mobile apps have played significant roles in sharing meditation experiences and promoting particular meditation traditions in China.
- 41 *Taobao*, emulating eBay and Amazon in the West, is one of the most popular online shopping websites in China.
- 42 About Luang Phor Kham Khian, see Phoebe Myers (2016). A trick of light: learning to confront fear at a forest monastery in Thailand. *Tricycle*, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/a-trick-of-light/> (accessed on 14 October 2021)

- 43 “Wat-Pa-Sukato,” Tourism Authority of Thailand, <https://www.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/wat-pa-sukato> (accessed on 18 October 2021); Wa Pa Sukato (Official website) [https://www.pasukato.org/EN\\_Forest\\_Monastery\\_Monks.html](https://www.pasukato.org/EN_Forest_Monastery_Monks.html) (accessed on 18 October 2021)
- 44 In the interview, Rongdao also mentioned her impressive experience of meeting Khun Kampol Thongbunnum, a disabled Thai layman who practiced Mahasati meditation. Rongdao said although Thongbunnum was dying in physical pain, he was filled with awareness and lightness during the meeting. For details, see “Bright and Shining Mind in a Disabled Body” <https://dharma-documentaries.net/bright-and-shining-mind-in-a-disabled-body> (accessed on 18 October 2021)
- 45 As I mentioned in another study, Wuyou, who ordained in Yangon, returned to China with dressing in Theravāda tradition. Yet he changed his robe to Chinese Buddhist style later, see footnote 23 of Lau (2021b).
- 46 For example, Li Miao, a sixty-five-year-old grandmother from Beijing travelled to Myanmar to learn meditation from U Tejaniya at Shweooming meditation center, see Lau (2017, pp. 327–28).
- 47 For example, for the second model of retreats held at Han Chinese Buddhist monasteries, the retreat at Yun Shan Monastery mentioned is an example; for the third model, about building up a Theravāda Buddhist community, Dhammavihara 法住禪林 meditation centre in Pa Auk tradition at Xishuangbanna 西雙版納 is an example. For details, see Lau (2018, pp. 183–89).
- 48 Yeung Hung attended *vipassanā* retreat in the United States.
- 49 As told by my informant Venerable Juexing.
- 50 As told by teachers from the Hong Kong Vipassanā Meditation Centre, religious activities in the PRC are restricted by the Regulations on Venues for Religious Activities 宗教活動場所管理條例.
- 51 Introduction about Nanchan Monastery <http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8D%97%E7%A6%85%E5%AF%BA/7988211> (accessed on 18 October 2021)
- 52 For details, see the website of Vipassana Meditation centres in mainland China <http://ng.81355.net/> (accessed on 20 October 2021)
- 53 As mentioned by Xuzhi, the books spread in mainland China including *Life is Practice* (Shenghuo jichanxiu 生活即禪修) and Manual of Self-awareness (*zijueshouce* 自覺手冊) <http://www.zndzc.org/1209.htm> (accessed on 25 March 2017).
- 54 The number is estimated from both the websites organised by Xuzhi and Yansong.
- 55 Mahasati Dynamic Meditation Centre, <http://www.zndzc.org/> (accessed on 18 October 2017)
- 56 The article about the koan of *longbomao* has been removed from the webpage <http://www.zndzc.org/jinglun.htm#mao> (accessed on 17 June 2017). For details, see Lau (2020a).
- 57 I did visit Gaomin Monastery three times for joining Chan meditation retreats between 2006 and 2007. I met Delin in 2007. He said women should be granted the same opportunity of practicing Chan.
- 58 Another source was among eight hundred participants in one Chan retreat, there were about 100 monks, 230 nuns, 80 laymen and 400 laywomen (Liu 2019, p. 137). It was said that when Laiguo was abbot, there were fewer than hundred people at the Chan hall.
- 59 *Huatouchan* is a practice developed by Dahui Zonggao, an influential Chan master in Song dynasty. More details about development of *kanhua chan*, see Chapter 3 Procreation and Patronage in the Song Chan School (Schlütter 2008, pp. 55–77).
- 60 The comments about the general lack of knowledge of Chan practices of Chinese monks is from my fieldwork and interview with an abbot of a Chan monastery (Lau 2018).
- 61 This is a complicated issue that can be discussed in another paper. See an article related to a criticism, “Who indeed has created this ‘four assemblies Chan hall’? Does it follow the Chan rituals? “四堂”的始作俑者到底是呢？到底符合不符合制呢？” [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XOUYdSAjt8R2R3soJccp6g?fbclid=IwAR1jp7HJwk8q44Q219hGW7t7h-BIoGk5\\_ocRMtv\\_nu6QYYNXuuv4Vs2ssw](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XOUYdSAjt8R2R3soJccp6g?fbclid=IwAR1jp7HJwk8q44Q219hGW7t7h-BIoGk5_ocRMtv_nu6QYYNXuuv4Vs2ssw) (accessed on 14 October 2021).
- 62 I visited the “four assemblies Chan hall” of Baofeng Monastery in Spring 2016. The hall was transformed from a public lecture hall, which could accommodate at least 80 people, since 2002. As I observed, there were about 10 nuns and 10 laywomen attended the *chanqi* retreat. Some monks would teach nuns about the traditional rituals of Chan hall. About the newly established “four assemblies Chan hall” of Yunmen Monastery, see Lee (2021).
- 63 See information about Baoji Monastery at baidu, a website emulating google in mainland China, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%9B%B9%E5%B1%B1%E5%AF%B6%E7%A9%8D%E5%AF%BA/18728184> (accessed on 18 October 2021).
- 64 It is said that Bhikṣuṇī Yangli, who has grown up from a Chinese medical family, has studied in France for some years before returned to China.
- 65 About the discussion of government intervention of Buddhist revival in China, see Chiu (2019). See an interview from the official youtube of Baoji Monastery <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82oM2ZYHX1Q> (accessed on 18 October 2021); also “Thousand days meditation at Baoji Monastery at Caoshan: Repentance for hundred thousand times in half a year” 拍曹山寺千日修：半年拜忏十万次. <https://fo.ifeng.com/c/7oVIJxe9EYL#p=8> (accessed on 18 October 2021).

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