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Zhongfeng Mingben and the Case of the Disappearing Laywomen

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Abstract

Lay female practitioners were an important part of Buddhist history in the Song and Yuan dynasties, but the nature and importance of their role is obscured by textual sources written almost exclusively by men. This paper takes one example of an androcentric genre—the biography of a monk—and considers how women have been marginalized. The primary biographers of Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263-1323) leave out women who played a role in his life. Drawing on other sources, I argue that in fact women were important to the development of his career, and that his teachings encompassed women.

Keywords:

Zhongfeng Mingben, Laywomen, Yuan dynasty, Chan, Guan Daosheng

中峰明本與女居士的難題

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摘要

在宋元佛教史中，女居士是很重要的部分，可是她們的歷史價值幾乎完全被男性文人的著作掩蓋。僧人傳記是一種以男性為中心的文體，本文以其為例來探討女居士如何被邊緣化在僧人的傳記之中。更具體地說，本文討論中峰明本（1263-1323）傳記中所遺漏的女人。根據其他的史料，可以證實女居士在明本的生涯中扮演很重要的角色，而且他的教誨包含女人。

關鍵詞：中峰明本、女居士、元朝、禪宗、管道升

It is common to read that Buddhist communities comprised four groups of people (*sizhong* 四眾): monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. On the surface of it, positing four orders might suggest that these groups have equal status, but in the historical manifestations of Buddhism, it is clear that these four are not weighted the same. The ordained community forms the core of Buddhism: copying and writing texts, performing rituals, and serving as fields of merit for lay believers. Monks have always far outnumbered nuns, and thus dominate Buddhist history. Laymen have also played a significant role, as these pious men serve as donors and advocates of Buddhism, and throughout Chinese history the importance of skill in writing has meant that textual evidence of their piety and engagement with Buddhist monks and institutions has survived in a variety of genres. The history of the fourth order, that of Buddhist laywomen, may be the most difficult to recover. Unlike the case with nuns, there is no reason to believe that laywomen were outnumbered by laymen; indeed, the opposite may be true. However, when accounts of women's religious practices are recorded, they are more often written by men, or edited by them, than come from the hands of women themselves. So it is apparent that men play a key role in shaping the religious lives of women.

Here, I seek to understand the obverse: What role do women play in the religious life of monks, and how do narratives about these men present these women? I take as the focus of my inquiry works by and about Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263-1323), one of the most outstanding monks of the Yuan dynasty. Chan monks, as we know, had extensive ties with literati men, relying on them for support of monasteries, serving as their teachers, and performing rituals at their behest. It can seem that these monks lived in a largely masculine world, moving between their fellow monks at the monastery and their elite patrons. Yet all these men had mothers, wives, and daughters, and even though they may appear only on the periphery of the literary world, these women were more central to the home and social lives of these men than is immediately apparent from the written record. I will look to the margins of this record, and attempt to bring to the fore the roles Buddhist laywomen played in the life of Mingben, considering too when—and why—they disappear within the accounts of this monk's life.

A word here is perhaps in order on the matter of the practice of lay Buddhist women during the late years of the Song dynasty, and the first half of the Yuan. There is no question that at this point women were active patrons and practitioners of Buddhism, and had been for some time. A quick perusal of the donor inscriptions in the Longmen caves—to take just one example—yields inscriptions from laywomen, in addition to donations from princesses

and empresses. Written between the fifth and eighth centuries, we learn from these inscriptions that some laywomen sold portions of their dowry to finance images, or used their family earnings. Some inscriptions record donations of family members on behalf of pious wives and mothers (McNair 2007, 169-71, 175-6). These kinds of brief hints of the activities and motivations of Buddhist lay women are the norm for the Song dynasty as well. As Mark Halperin notes, it can be somewhat difficult to locate laywomen in Song sources, and we must often rely on funeral inscriptions to recover some of these details of women's religious lives. These inscriptions are representations of piety, removed at least one degree from pious behaviors themselves. Halperin has also tallied the number of times Buddhism is mentioned in funerary inscriptions, and finds that a mere 22% of these inscriptions mention Buddhism. This too is part of the representation of women's piety: not all authors of such inscriptions deemed Buddhism praiseworthy, or they decided that religious practices did not merit inclusion in the telling of the lives of elite women. However, the number of funerary inscriptions for women declines greatly in the thirteenth century, for reasons that are not entirely clear, leaving us with even less information (Halperin 2006, 53-62). Although we can also draw on Buddhist sources, the picture of lay women during this period is at present an incomplete sketch, and may indeed remain so. What we do know suggests that women were engaged in a wide range of practices. Within their homes, Buddhist laywomen read and chanted scriptures, recited the name of Amitābha, sat in Chan meditation, and gave up personal adornment (Ebrey 1993, 125-8). Keeping to a vegetarian diet was another way women expressed their piety; many gave up meat as a consequence of a vow (Lu 2002, 74-9). Some women were Buddhist recluses within the family compound, and some were active outside the household, making donations to Buddhist institutions or pursuing charitable works as part of their religious commitment (Halperin 2006, 75-8, 81-3). Women often became Buddhist, or *more* Buddhist, at middle age, after child-rearing duties were largely complete. Some participated in activities for lay Buddhists at local temples, and monks and nuns visited private homes, although both activities came in for criticism by elite males. Lay women also taught each other, passing on knowledge and practices within family compounds (Ebrey 1993, 125-8). When they reached their final hours, lay Buddhist women were commended for dying good deaths, passing on to the next world peacefully in such a way as to verify the efficacy of their Pure Land practice (Halperin 2006, 88-9).

The division of Chinese Buddhism into distinct traditions or schools may not be particularly germane in considering the role of women. As the

description above shows, Buddhist laywomen are perhaps better understood by the devotional activities in which they engaged than through institutional ties. Mingben, however, identified and was identified as a Chan monk, so Chan ideas about women merit noting here. First, the Chan tradition was driven by male lineages: teachers passed the dharma on to their best students, and later generations would construct genealogies to reflect this male transmission. Second, the Chan tradition, having adopted the stance that inherent enlightenment was accessible to all, valued women's attainment. A number of nuns appear in Chan writings during the Song dynasty, including Miaodao 妙道 and Miaozong 妙總, dharma-heirs of Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163). Writing about Miaodao, he praises her in neutral terms but also employs what Levering calls the "rhetoric of equality" (Levering 1999, 203; also Hsieh 2000). Other Chan masters of the Song dynasty also had female dharma heirs (including a laywoman), and these accomplished nuns were largely drawn from the upper classes, as were their male counterparts (Hsieh 1999, 154-60).

The tradition of female dharma-heirs continued into the Yuan, and certainly shaped Mingben. His teacher, Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峰原妙 (1238-1295), counted among his followers a nun, Pugui Wuwei 普貴無為, and Wenjian Guxin 文鑑古心 was a student of Mingben (Zhenhua 1988, 44, 47). Both died in 1322, and so would have been the same generation as Mingben. Both were known for their written and spoken eloquence, and Wuwei was said to have left behind relics (Grant 2009, 15). Mingben, too, had contact with nuns: one nun asked for an inscription for a portrait of Mingben that had yet to be painted (*GL* 32115c).¹ But the female followers of Dahui and Yuanmiao were exceptional, and nuns make infrequent appearances in Chan records until the Qing dynasty. Then, as Beata Grant has noted, the revival of Buddhism along with new freedoms for women meant that more women were able to study with Chan masters, and then to take up active roles as nuns. Their

¹ *Tianmu Zhongfeng Heshang Guanglu* 天目中峰和尚廣錄 (henceforth *GL*), in *Zhonghua Dazang jing* 中華大藏經, 1.74: 32214a-b. [Taipei]: Xiuding Zhonghua Dazang jing hui, 1965. The *Zhonghua Dazang jing* reproduces the text as found in the *Jisha* 磧砂 canon, compiled in 1335, and supplements the missing portion of the text with that from the *Hongwu Nanzang* 洪武南藏 edition, compiled in 1387. I have compared this text with a microform of the Yuan dynasty copy owned by the National Central Library, Taiwan. For a more detailed textual history, see Shiina (1990, 105-10). On Yuan editions of the Buddhist canon, see also Chikusa (2000, 337-60).

institutional prominence and mastery of the Chan tradition would lead to the collection and publication of their writings (Grant 2009, 11).

Locating laywomen in Zhongfeng Mingben's life and writings requires some effort. Mingben was the most eminent Chan monk in Jiangnan during the first two decades of the fourteenth century, and his influence spread far beyond his home region. Because of his prominence, his sermons and writings were collected and published shortly after his death, and received imperial approval for inclusion in the Buddhist canon. We also have not one but three biographies of the monk. First, Zushun 祖順 (d.u.), one of Mingben's disciples, wrote a "record of conduct" (*xinglu* 行錄) for his master in 1324, just over a year after Mingben's death. Included at the end of Mingben's works, it is the fullest account of the monk's life, travel, and teachings. The other two biographical texts are both by laymen: Yu Ji 虞集 (1272-1348) wrote an inscription for his stūpa in 1329, and Song Ben 宋本 (1281-1334) also authored a commemorative inscription. Monastic disciples and secular elites have different agendas, shaped by who they are and for whom they are writing; these priorities emerge clearly in their tellings of Mingben's life. Yu Ji hailed from the south, but was summoned to the capital Dadu 大都 in 1297, where he occupied a series of prestigious academic positions. He was also well-connected to Daoists, for whom he wrote commemorations and inscriptions like the one considered here (Sun 1981). Song Ben was from the north and likewise served the Yuan government. Both men were involved in the compilation of *The Great Imperial Institutions for Regulating the World* (*Huangchao jingshi dadian* 皇朝經世大典) (Lam 1992, 77-93). Their participation in the effort to memorialize Mingben lends the monk the imprimatur of the official realm. Yu Ji's account—the shorter of the two—can provide us with a starting point for considering how Mingben's image has been shaped, and how his social standing was understood by the leading men of the dynasty. Yu Ji opens with the lines:

The Chan master Gaofeng [Yuan]miao lived at Lion's Cliff on Mount Tianmu, setting himself up at Death Pass in order to distinguish among the gentlemen who would study Chan. Those who saw the cliffs and retreated were many. He had one student named Master [Ming]ben, who is none other than the monk Zhongfeng. When [Mingben] was born there were strange omens, and as a child he played at Buddhist services. When he was a bit older he studied scriptures and teachings, burned his arm, and was very serious in his pursuit of Buddhism. Day and night he toiled, even knocking his head against a pillar to keep

himself awake. He wished to bring this to a conclusion and so entered Death Pass, secretly requesting [Gaofeng's] mind-essentials.

天目之山有師子巖，高峯妙禪師居之，設死關以辨決參學之士。望崖而退者，衆矣。得一人曰本公，是爲中峯和尚師。生有異徵，爲童兒嬉戲必爲佛事。稍長閱經教，然皆臂，求佛甚切，晝夜彌勵困，則首觸柱以自微。期必得乃已，及入死關密叩心要 (GL 32214a-b).

In these first lines of the stūpa inscription, Yu's priority is to place Mingben with a lineage, thereby providing him the Buddhist equivalent to the family background that opened secular biographies. He begins not with Mingben himself but with his teacher Gaofeng Yuanmiao, noting that the elder monk was a demanding master who only accepted those most dedicated to studying Chan. Through this opening, Yu Ji treats Mingben's life as equivalent to his career, and as beginning with his relationship with his teacher. After this is established, Yu Ji circles back to Mingben's biological beginnings, and specifically to the signs in Mingben's childhood that he would become a monk. His childhood experiences serve to establish Mingben as a dedicated Buddhist, and offer the reader no information about the monk's family. Mingben's youthful pursuits serve as prelude to his Chan career, and Yu Ji next focuses on the monk's experience of awakening, noting that he had a moment of understanding while reciting *Diamond Sūtra*, followed by a more thoroughgoing awakening while observing a stream. From this point Mingben became a teacher, according to Yu Ji, and was prolific and eloquent in speech. He thereby earned his own master's respect, and Gaofeng gave him a portrait in an exchange that appears to confirm him as heir.² The portrait inscription read: "My form is inconceivable / none of the Buddhas and patriarchs can see it / I only permit this unworthy son / to get a glimpse of half my nose" 我相不思議，佛祖莫能視，獨許不肖兒，見得半邊鼻 (GL 32214c). Other than the phrase from the *Diamond Sūtra* which precipitated Mingben's insight into the scriptures, this is the only direct quotation in Yu Ji's biography, suggesting that these words held special significance. The emphasis on the portrait as confirmation of dharma transmission is in keeping with the master-teacher relationship that has dominated the first part of this inscription.

With the death of his teacher, Mingben's independent career as teacher and author comes to the forefront. Yu Ji lists the monk's written output,

² For a discussion of portraits and transmission in Chan, see Foulk and Sharf (1993-4).

including five major works and a number of supplementary texts; following the discussion of the master-student relationship, these serve as evidence that Gaofeng's "transmission was not in vain" 其授受不虛 (GL 32214c). Yu Ji notes that Mingben's writings "were widely circulated in his time" 盛傳于世 (GL 32214c). Having established the reason for Mingben's fame, Yu Ji then goes on to establish proof of his fame through an account of the honor and attention bestowed on the monk by the leading men of the times. This includes two emperors:

Emperor Renzong had heard of him, and wished to employ him, but Mingben would not go. [The Emperor] had made a robe woven with gold, and gave him the honorific "Chan Master of Buddhist Compassion, Complete Illumination and Vast Wisdom," [also] honoring the Lion Cloister with the name "Chan Temple of the True Line." Emperor Yingzong likewise offered him incense and made him robes, sending them to where [Mingben] lived to demonstrate his respect. The Imperial Son-in-Law and Defender-in-Chief Prince of Shen, Wang Zhang, once ordered someone to approach the teacher and ask the meaning of the Dharma, and because the answer was insufficient, he asked the Emperor to be allowed to go in person. Then he built a pavilion in front of the cliff, and called it "Expressing the True Limit," and obtained [the Master's] teaching.

仁宗皇帝聞而聘之，不至。製金紋伽梨衣，賜之；號之曰佛慈圓照廣慧禪師，賜師子院名曰正宗禪寺。英宗皇帝亦封香，製衣，即所居而修敬焉。駙馬太尉瀋王王璋嘗使人從師問法意，以爲未足請於上親往見之。既見構亭巖前曰真際表，得法也 (GL 32214c).

Renzong had hoped that Mingben would agree to come to court (or perhaps take up a key abbotship), and both emperors express their esteem for the monk, in the form of honorifics and ceremonial robes. Mingben also attracted the attention of both monastic and secular elites, including highly-ranked *semu* 色目 officials, and the Korean royal mentioned in this passage. He was sought out for abbotships at Jingshan 徑山 and Lingyin 靈隱 monasteries, and officials of the Bureau of Tibetan and Buddhist Affairs were ordered to "treat [Mingben] with special deference" 尤加敬服. Among the eminent associations noted by Yu Ji is Mingben's relationship with Zhao Mengfu 趙

孟頫 (1254-1322), who looked to the monk as his teacher, and with Qu Tingfa 瞿霆發 (1251-1312), a local landowner in area of Mount Tianmu.³

It is not enough for Yu Ji to name Mingben's highly placed connections: he also speaks of the monk's great popularity. His followers are "like clouds" 如雲—they come from across Asia, and their donations to his temple are lavish. Mingben adapted his teaching and presentation to suit the needs of these diverse groups, yet remained modest. Yu Ji concludes by noting the circumstances of Mingben's birth and death. To summarize the narrative arc of this biography, Yu Ji has constructed it so as to emphasize the key relationships in Mingben's life: his teacher, his patrons, and his disciples. For Yu Ji, all these figures are male, and there are no women that merited recording in Mingben's life story. Granted, this is one particular telling of Mingben's life, but it reflects what Yu Ji and other elite men believed to be important about an eminent monk's life.

We must pause, however, even at the very beginning at Yu Ji's account and think about the women who have been left out: no matter how great a teacher Gaofeng might have been, Mingben's life started not with him, but with Mingben's own mother. Although Yu Ji does not mention her, other of Mingben's biographers do include her. We learn from Zushun, the disciple responsible for writing Mingben's "Record of Conduct," that Mingben's mother was surnamed Li 李, and that the family lived in Qiantang 錢塘, in the area of Hangzhou. While Zushun provides no more information about the family's background or social standing, he does offer a detail about Mingben's birth: his mother "dreamt of the monk Wumen [Hui]kai 無門開 arriving at their home with a lantern" (GL 32212a). A mother dreaming of a monk is a fairly common trope in Buddhist biographies, yet the monk in this case is significant both for Mingben's eventual Chan lineage and for his location. Wumen Huikai 無門慧開 (1183-1260) was the compiler of the *Wumen guan* 無門關, a collection of forty-eight *gongan* 公案 which he selected, and to which he added both a prose commentary and a verse. Born in Hangzhou, he returned to that city in 1246 to head the Monastery for the Protection of the State and Compassionate Kings (護國仁王寺). According to *Xu deng cun gao* 續燈存稿, written during the Ming dynasty, at the end of his life he retired to the edge of West Lake, where he still attracted many students (X 1585, 84: 680c1-681a7). Thus Huikai was a prominent figure in Hangzhou, and his death was still within recent memory. As such he was a likely candidate for

³ GL 32214c-32215a. On Qu's life, see his biography in *Zhengde Songjiang fuzhi* 正德松江府志 28: 15a-b (635), and Nishio (1985, 40).

Mingben's mother's dream.⁴ We cannot know whether she truly had such a dream, or whether this detail was inserted in Mingben's life story at a later point in time. But it is not too far-fetched, I think, to imagine that Mingben's mother was a lay Buddhist who may have known of Huikai. Interestingly, when Mingben had become more serious about his Buddhist practice but before he was ordained as a monk, he made trips to Mount Lingdong 靈洞 to practice Chan, and this connects him again to Wumen Huikai, as this site was associated with the earlier monk.⁵

The recounting of Mingben's mother's dream presents her as a passive figure, a conduit of information but not an actor. Zushun's account of Mingben's early years suggests that the dream-omen was correct, but also presents Mingben as fully formed, and seemingly not in need of much in the way of mothering: "His appearance and comportment was exceptional, complete with all the features of an adult. As soon as he left swaddling clothes, he sat cross-legged; when he was able to speak he then chanted using Indic melodies. When he played it was always at Buddhist activities" 神儀挺異，具大人相。纔離襁褓便跏趺坐，能言便歌讚梵唄，嬉戲必為佛事 (GL 32212a). The lack of childlike qualities had long been common in accounts of exceptional persons, reflecting as well the negative valuation of immaturity (Kinney 1995, 6). In addition to his adult behaviors, Mingben exhibits a precocious mastery of Buddhist rites. The latter reinforces not only Mingben's special qualities, but also the claim that he is the reincarnation of an earlier monk: such skills may be taken as evidence of Buddhist practice in previous lifetimes.⁶ If we take a somewhat more modern approach to child development, we might well wonder if Mingben's precocious attainments in the realm of Buddhist comportment were not the result of imitating someone, and his mother would seem to be a good candidate for a family member from

4 By the seventeenth century, the connection between Huikai and Mingben has grown: a gazetteer of the area refers to Mingben as the "rebirth" (*houshen* 後身) of Huikai (Ji 2006, 39).

5 Noguchi makes this identification, and says that Mount Lingdong is also known as Mount Linping 臨平, to the northeast of Qiantang (Noguchi 2005, 90-1). That Mingben went to this site to practice may suggest that his mother's dream was known to him, and not a later elaboration of his own disciples.

6 The imprint of past practice is a feature of miracle tales as well. In one tale associated with the *Lotus Sūtra*, a boy shows an affinity for the scripture that extends from one lifetime to the next. Because his family's copy of the sūtra had been damaged in his former life, the young student could not remember a certain character when reading the scripture (Stevenson 1995, 444-5).

whom Mingben might have learned to sit cross-legged and chant. Such was the case with a later example: Miriam Levering discusses the autobiography of Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546-1623), in which he describes several childhood exchanges with his mother that proved formative in his spiritual development. Levering suggests that traditional biographers would have de-emphasized his mother, and that it is “striking” that in his self-narration, Deqing “placed considerably more importance on his relationship with his mother” (Levering 2013, 143-5). A similar process may be at work in Mingben's biographies.

Zushun treats the death of Mingben's mother as the endpoint of his master's youth. He writes, “He buried his mother when he was eight years old, and before he had finished the *Lunyu* and *Mengzi* he gave up his studies” 九歲喪母，讀《論語》、《孟子》未終卷已輟學 (GL 32212a). The loss of his mother seems to have been a pivotal point for Mingben, leading to his abandonment of secular education and turn to Buddhism. This emerges clearly in Mingben's own telling of this episode in his life, where after giving up his studies he remarks, “From early on, I bore the determination to become a monk” 蚤負出家志 (GL 32174c). Zushun puts the emergence of his vocation later, writing that Mingben's vocation became apparent when Mingben was fifteen years old. No matter the discrepancy in timing, Mingben's mother's death is followed in his mind by a turn to Buddhism. Was it that she was a model of Buddhist piety for the young boy? Was it that her death marked the young boy and prompted him to turn to Buddhism for understanding? These accounts provide a sequence of events but not the motivations behind them.

While we know that Mingben had a mother, it might be plausible to think that his decision to become a monk led him into an all-male world. Yet it was a lay woman who facilitated his entry into the Buddhist clergy. In a sermon in which he discusses his own religious path, Mingben says, “In the second month of 1287, the pious Laywoman Yang gave me money sufficient [to allow me to] follow the old man of the mountains and seas, climbing the mountain to have my head shaved and to put on robes” 丁亥二月，信女人楊氏授以資具，從山海翁登山薙染 (GL 32174c). As was true for Yu Ji's biography, Laywoman Yang is not mentioned in the other narratives of Mingben's life, which instead emphasize his relationship with his teacher, and hence male lineages. Yet it is important to note that for the second time a woman facilitates his advancement on the path to monkhood, here in concrete ways. As his mother's death is linked to his initial decision to become a monk, Laywoman Yang provides the material means for him to do so. The story is

retold by one of Mingben's disciples, Tianru Weize 天如惟則 (1286-1354), in the context of a request for his inscription:

Zhiyue, a monk of that cloister, planned to record its origins in stone, and so he visited me. He said: "The former National Teacher [Mingben] was not willing to dwell in the secular world, but his parents were troubled by this. In the neighborhood was a palace lady of the Song, Yang Miaoxi. She worshipped the teaching of Laozi and was a Daoist priestess. She knew the Master was not ordinary and urged his parents to allow him to become a monk and have his head shaved. She also helped him with his ordination certificate, robes, and implements. She asked for a little of the hair that had been shaved off, stored it in a scented box, and made offerings to it in a pure room. After several years *śarīra* were produced from the hair, and as time went on there were even more, finally numbering over fifty grains. They were five-colored glimmering crystals, and those who saw them were amazed. From this, Madame Yang came to study Buddhism, and because she was old she entrusted the *śarīra* to the Cloud-Dwelling Cloister."

住菴沙門指月謀記其由於石，謁余曰：「初國師不願處俗，父母患之。鄰有故宋宮人楊氏妙錫，奉老子之教為女冠。識師非凡器，乃喻其父母令出家及祝髮。又助僧牒衣具，而求其所祝之髮少許，貯以香函供之淨室。越數年有舍利生於髮，久而益多，積至五十餘顆。五色晶瑩，觀者駭異。楊自是易所學以學佛，既老遂以舍利託雲居。」⁷

This latter part of the story is an important part of Mingben's growing reputation, but we also hear something of the religious life of women. Yang had been a devout Daoist, yet also took an interest in Mingben's predilection for Buddhism, and was willing to facilitate his entry into the monastic order. Seemingly already aware that he is exceptional, Lady Yang sought out his hair as token and a relic. She behaves in such a way as to confirm Mingben's standing, and while we cannot know the exact timing of the hair's production of relics—it could have been many years later—in her very act of seeking out his hair to worship, she helped to assure that he would be someone to worship.

⁷ "Puying guoshi shelita ji" 普應國師舍利塔記 in *Tianru Weize Chanshi yulu* 天如惟則禪師語錄, X 1403, 70: 809c. Cited in Yü (1982, 466 n. 25). For this anecdote as it circulated in the mid-sixteenth century, see Tian Rucheng's 田汝成 (active mid-sixteenth century) *Xihu youlan zhiyu* 西湖遊覽志餘 14: 225.

Her procurement of his hair acts as his mother's dream did: to predict a great future for Mingben. Laywoman Yang proved crucial in Mingben's monastic career, and the development of the cult around him.

It was this cult—offering reverence to the hair relics that were an outcome of Mingben's tonsure—that prompted the written account of Yang Miaoqi. After Mingben became a monk, she seems not to have continued contact with him. Mingben does have at least one important ongoing relationship with a laywoman, but we find it obscured behind his relationship with male patrons. All biographies of Mingben make sure to mention his connection with Zhao Mengfu. Zhao's discipleship, and their friendship, vaulted Mingben to national status, brought him into elite cultural circles, and further tied him to the imperial house. Therefore Mingben's biographers had ample reason to stress Zhao's patronage, but do little more than establish this elite connection. The most valuable resource for understanding their relationship is not these biographical sources, but rather the letters Zhao wrote to Mingben. Although Zhao is mentioned in Mingben's writings, the letters reflect the closeness of their friendship outside the demands of more formal genres. And although the collection is one-sided, preserved because of Zhao's fame as a calligrapher, it shows the often mundane back-and-forth between master and disciple, friend and friend.⁸ This relationship extended to Zhao's family as well, especially his wife Guan Daosheng 管道生 (1262-1319). Zhao Mengfu was a remarkable man in many spheres, and his wife seems to have been no less talented. This may well be due to the fact that Guan Daosheng was a daughter in an eminent family without sons. Her father's intellectual attention thus focused on her, and she received an education, making her one of a small minority of women who were literate. It was natural, then, that she would marry a man of great talent (Rossabi 1989, 71). The couple shared a commitment to, and a talent for, painting and calligraphy. Both of them were known to have painted the walls of monasteries, at times choosing as their subject images of bamboo, for which Guan Daosheng was especially famous.⁹ Bamboo paintings are a traditional subject of literati painting, able to display the artist's skill with the brush but also because bamboo grows straight—symbolizing moral uprightness—and can endure adversity, characteristics

⁸ No manuscript letters from Mingben to Zhao are extant, leaving us with a one-sided conversation. These manuscript letters preserve a type of material that does not always make its way into literary collections, offering a glimpse of social interactions. See Heller (2009).

⁹ For a discussion of Guan's bamboo paintings, see McCausland (2011, 279ff).

literati wished to see in themselves. It is an interesting side-note that Zhao Mengfu's last dated painting was of a single branch of bamboo, and was intended for Mingben (McCausland 2011, 327-8).

Beyond their interest in painting, the couple also shared their Buddhist faith, and Chan monks were frequent callers to the Zhao household. Like her husband, Guan Daosheng considered Mingben to be her teacher, and exchanged letters and tokens with the monk independent of her spouse. In one letter, she writes of both receiving and sending gifts. In the polite language typical of this type of letter, Guan expresses her gratitude for a gift of incense pearls given by Mingben, writing that with a sincere heart she sends in return a blue silk hat and a white handkerchief.¹⁰ Another surviving letter shows Guan's commitment to universal deliverance, a process of salvation that for her began with assuring the rebirths of deceased relatives.

I have copied the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* to repay the kindness of my late parents, and to rescue my deceased son and daughter from the suffering of transmigration. I especially thank my teacher for his great compassion in instructing the deceased, so that they are all able to leave behind the sea of suffering. But if my teacher gives rise to a single [compassionate] thought, how could it be that only my parents-in-law, my parents, and my son and daughter attain rebirth in the Pure Land? [It must be that] the souls in all of the dharma-realms will all attain the Buddhist path, and achieve enlightenment.

道昇手書《般若經》，報薦先父母深恩，及救薦亡兒女輪回之苦。極感謝我師大發慈悲，點化亡者，皆得離苦海。我師但起一念，何獨道昇公姑父母兒女得生淨土？一切法界含靈皆成佛道，盡證菩提矣。¹¹

Her act of piety is intended for the benefit of specific people, yet she feels that the great spiritual power possessed by Mingben will spread beyond these few souls to all sentient beings. Guan focuses first on her parents, and she was deeply concerned with the issue of sacrifices to them. She had no brothers, and seems to have been the oldest surviving daughter, so she saw it as her responsibility to ensure that her parents received proper postmortem care. Her husband took her concerns as his own, and shortly after their marriage built a temple to serve as a memorial. Zhao also wrote an essay lauding his wife's

¹⁰ *Midian zhulin shi qubaoji hebian* 秘殿珠林石渠寶笈合編, 1676-7.

¹¹ Liu and Huang (2002, 43484).

filial piety (Rossabi 1989, 71, 81). In addition to her parents, Guan's specific dedication also naturally includes her deceased children.

Later in the letter, her own intent to save all beings is clarified, and also put in context of her own practice. She writes of her heavy karmic debts from past lives—for which she no doubt took her female body as evidence—and also of the distractions of daily life. Nevertheless, she kept in mind Mingben's teachings to her, and contemplated the critical phrase (*huatou* 話頭) in keeping with Mingben's favored form of Chan practice.¹² Along with her husband, Guan was inspired by the compassion of Śākyamuni, who taught in order that all could attain salvation. Thus the couple desired to make their own vow on behalf of a wide range of people, including their own deceased relatives and those spirits without anyone to offer sacrifices on their behalf, whether or not they have ancestral tablets. Guan and Zhao vowed that all these beings would not fall into the three evil paths and instead should attain early rebirth in a Buddha-realm.

Guan writes in her letters of the difficulty of practicing Chan alongside other, more mundane, commitments, a concern she shared with her husband. Also like Zhao, her faith was defined in part by death, and the desire to provide aid to deceased relatives. In Zhao's letters, his discussion of death is usually focused on a certain individual; Guan, on the other hand, approaches postmortem care from a broader perspective, vowing to save all sentient beings. In this letter, she uses the expression "universal salvation" (*pudu* 普度) to refer to the outgrowth of Śākyamuni's compassion. Although she suggests that these masses reflected a vow undertaken by both herself and her husband, a later letter by her husband suggests that this is a special vow of Guan herself. A number of Zhao's letters speak of his grief at losing her, describe the rituals he arranged after her death, and further detail his attempts to arrange the rite for universal salvation after her passing. No doubt Zhao's own faith played a significant role in his willingness to do so, but he was also acting as he believed his wife would have wished, and according to plans she had made in life.¹³ For his part, Mingben was at this point in his life in retreat and seems not to have made himself available to perform rituals on behalf of Guan's spirit. He participated by proxy, sending one of his disciples and making a gift

¹² For an overview of *kanhua* 看話 practice, see Buswell (1987, 321-77).

¹³ Letter of the twelfth day of the sixth month of 1321, owned by the National Palace Museum. Liu and Huang (2002, 468), and *Quan Yuan wen* 19: 41.

of incense and other offerings to be placed before Guan's spirit tablet.¹⁴ Zhao frequently acted on her behalf, but her own letters show a piety distinct from that of her husband.

If we follow the textual trail left by the Zhao family, we also discover that the connection continued into the next generation. Their second son, Zhao Yong 趙雍 (1289-1360), wrote to the monk shortly after his mother's death, expressing appreciation for Mingben's kindness to the family.¹⁵ In 1322, Zhao Yong copied a set of poems by Mingben entitled "Longing for the Pure Land" (懷淨土詩). According to a Ming account, he may have also assisted his father in copying sūtras for the monk.¹⁶ In Zhao Mengfu, Guan Daosheng, and their children, we have a family that was Buddhist together, with overlapping ties to Mingben and the monks around him. This suggests a Buddhism that was not of the "inner quarters" as it were, but a significant part of family identity. We know of Guan Daosheng's role because she was an unusually talented woman, and because of letters that provide us an alternative view of their relationship. However, we might wonder how many other Buddhist laymen were accompanied in their piety by supportive and active spouses, who interacted with Chan monks both in their own right, and alongside the men of their families.

Mingben clearly considered the two partners in their Chan practice. In a sermon given before Zhao's burial, Mingben remarked on the couple's ability to practice Chan with seriousness:

What is essential in studying Buddhism is just relying on a single thought, and believing you will reach the place [of awakening]. It is like rubbing a mirror: If you have not rubbed it completely, then the dust has not disappeared. If the dust has not been eliminated, then the light is not manifest. Now our Minister-Duke [Zhao] and his wife, the Duchess of Wei, although they themselves are the great talents of the highest echelon, they are not because of this deluded, and although

¹⁴ Harrist and Fong (1999, 126). See also Jiang (1977, 25); Nakata and Fu (1981-3, 146).

¹⁵ *Midian zhulin Shi qubaoji hebian*, 1677.

¹⁶ Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1316-1403) in his *Shushi huiyao* 書史會要 writes that "The master [Zhao Mengfu] once was writing the *Diamond Sūtra* for the monk of the cloister of Illusory Abiding, and had not gotten even halfway. Yong completed it, and no one could discern the point at which he picked up" 公嘗為幻住庵僧寫《金剛經》未半，雍足成之，其聯續處，人莫能辨。 Quoted in Liu and Huang (2002, 485).

they themselves have faced encumbrances their whole lives, they have not been obstructed by them. Every time they truly contemplated the correct thought, they did so with persistence and diligence, like an old monk in the forest who in silence forgets conditions, not ever in the least abandoning [the correct thought].

學佛之要，惟憑一念，但信得及處。譬之磨鏡：未有磨極而塵不消，塵消而光不現者。故我相公與魏國夫人，雖身抱冠世之奇才而不為其所惑，雖身嬰畢世之塵累而不為其所障。每於真參正念孜孜然，兀兀然，猶林下老衲寂爾忘緣，未嘗少棄 (GL 32081c).

When it comes time to sum up Zhao's life, Mingben does so with reference to Zhao and his wife together. This attests both to her importance in her husband's life, and to her status as co-equal practitioner.

Although Mingben's official biographies emphasize male monastic lineages and his relationships with Buddhist laymen, looking more carefully at his biography has revealed three laywomen who played key roles in his career. His mother likely provided Mingben's earliest example of Buddhist piety, and may have introduced him to stories of local monks. Laywoman Yang donated money at a key point in his career, a kind of patronage unlikely to be inscribed or commemorated. Stories about Laywoman Yang also told of her collecting bodily relics, contributing to the growth of a cult around Mingben. Guan Daosheng wrote to Mingben, sent him gifts, and pursued a discipleship alongside her husband.

But these three women may not be isolated cases: we have evidence that Mingben expected laywomen to be part of his religious community. Among Mingben's unique contributions to Yuan Buddhist life were the "regulations for purity" (*qinggui* 清規) that he authored for his cloister. As we know from his biography, Mingben trained under Gaofeng at a temple the elder monk had established on Mount Tianmu. But after Gaofeng's death, Mingben refused to lead that temple, and also repeatedly refused requests to assume the abbacies of the most important Buddhist monasteries in the region. Instead, Mingben took to his boat, or retreated to the mountains—efforts that were ultimately unsuccessful in discouraging followers. In response to these students, Mingben eventually founded a series of cloisters (*an* 庵), and wrote a code to govern practices therein. His work draws on other codes of the time, but differs enough to suggest that Mingben had his own ideas about what religious communities should be. For our purposes, it is enough to note that these must have been communities of monks large enough to merit writing down rules,

and that these communities seem to have interacted with the residents of the local area. Rituals such as prayers for rain suggest this, as do the prayer formulae Mingben included. For example, in dedications of merit (*huixiang* 回向) Mingben provides variations for monks, men, and women (*Huanzhu'an qinggui*, X 1248, 63: 580a21). Likewise, prayers for the deceased come in three variations, with a note at the beginning: "To be used interchangeably by monks and lay men and women" 僧俗男女皆可通用 (X 1248, 63: 577c7). Mingben also includes prayers (*fuyuan* 伏願) with the same three variations of monks, laymen, and laywomen. The prayers for laywomen make reference to the ultimate nonduality of nature, in which there is no distinction between male and female (*feinan feinu* 非男非女) and the dragon-king's daughter (*longnu* 龍女) from the *Lotus Sūtra* (X 1248, 63: 579c21-580a2). These are common tropes for discussions of gender, and certainly are not innovative ways of talking about women's religiosity, but Mingben sees this audience as important enough to distinguish. He may be doing so through what amount to no more than clichés, but the inclusion of these variations for women in his own code demonstrate that laywomen were a distinct part of his community. In all likelihood, the reason these texts do not include nuns to round out the four classes of Buddhist believers is that nuns would not have been living in the community. The fact that there are *three* options demonstrates that this is not a text written for a theoretical Buddhist community but for a living community of monks who had interactions with the lay people residing nearby, even though the prayers and dedications only hint at these interactions.

Finally, in the passage from Tianru Weize quoted above, he also writes of Mingben's great impact on all social classes. We know of the eminent men of the realm who sought instruction from and supported Mingben, but Weize also says that Mingben's teachings spread to the lower classes, to "street urchins and stove women" 街童灶婦. Both the code, and brief notices such as this, serve as reminders that the laywomen with whom monks had interactions were more varied than the elite women represented more fully by the textual tradition.

Biographies of monks, and their collected records, were the products of male hands, and reflected male perspectives; Yu Ji's biography of Mingben demonstrates this. Yet even though male narratives dominate, the story is not quite right without women.¹⁷ Restoring the place of laywomen begins with

¹⁷ Hillary Mantel, two-time winner of the Man Booker prize for her historical fiction about the life of Thomas Cromwell, has noted that constructing robust female characters while also avoid hackneyed roles is a challenge. In her profile

recognizing that there are places where they are missing—that there is a “case” to be taken up. Looking in the cracks of male narratives, we find women who were correspondents and patrons, mothers and devotees. Although partially effaced, they had important roles in the lives of monks. These women engaged in their own Buddhist practice, but they did more than carry out their spiritual formation in the inner quarters. To think about their place in Buddhist history, we also have to think about these laywomen as active characters in the lives both of Buddhist laymen and of monks. That is, locating women on the margins of male narratives tells us not just about the roles of Buddhist laywomen, but also how these roles intersected with the careers of monks and laymen. Lady Yang and Lady Guan offer two examples of how such interactions may have taken shape.

of Mantel in the October 15, 2012 issue of *The New Yorker*, Larissa MacFarquhar characterizes the issue thusly: “This was always a problem with historical fiction, if you liked to stick closely to the record: there was very little information about women, on the whole, but if you wrote a novel without them it seemed off-kilter.”

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