

The Practice of Fasting after Midday in Contemporary Chinese Nunneries

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According to monastic disciplinary texts, Buddhist monastic members are prohibited from eating solid food after midday. This rule has given rise to much debate, past and present, particularly between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist communities. This article explores Chinese Buddhist nuns' attitudes toward the rule about not eating after noon, and its enforcement in contemporary monastic institutions in Taiwan and Mainland China. It goes on to investigate the external factors that may have influenced the way the rule is observed, and brings to light a diversity of opinions on the applicability of the rule as it has been shaped by socio-cultural contexts, including nuns' adaptation to the locals' ethos in today's Taiwan and Mainland China.

Introduction

Food plays a pivotal role in the life of every human being, as the medium for the body's basic needs and health, and is closely intertwined with most other aspects of living. As aptly put by Roel Sterckx (2005:1), the bio-cultural relationship of humans to eating and food "is now firmly implanted as a valuable tool to explore aspects of a society's social, political and religious make up." In the

realm of food and religion, food control and diet prohibitions exist in different forms in many world faiths. According to Émile Durkheim (1915:306), “[i]n general, all acts characteristic of the ordinary life are forbidden while those of the religious life are taking place. The act of eating is, of itself, profane; for it takes place every day, it satisfies essentially utilitarian and material needs and it is a part of our ordinary existence. This is why it is prohibited in religious times.” Fasting, for example, is a common ascetic practice in many world religions.¹ In Buddhism, monks (*bhikṣus*) and nuns (*bhikṣuṇīs*) are expressly forbidden to eat after midday by the *vinaya*, Buddhist disciplinary texts² compiled in India during and after the time of the Buddha.³ According to the *vinaya*, the rules known as the *prātimokṣa* were laid down by the Buddha, one by one, each time a monk or a nun was considered to have done something wrong. In other words, the precepts concerning eating are governed by the principle of establishing rules when and as transgressions occur. The *Dharmaguptakavinaya* presents the origin of an important rule via the following story:

The people of Rājagrha organize festivities. Two *bhikṣus*, Nanda and Upananda, both beautiful men, go to see the festivities. When the people see them, someone proposes to offer them food and drinks. When, in the evening, they return to the monastery, the other *bhikṣus* ask why they are that late, whereupon Nanda and Upananda tell them about the festivities. Late in the afternoon, the *bhikṣu* Kāḷodāyī goes to beg and the night falls. Around that time, he arrives at the house of a pregnant woman. At the moment that the woman goes out of the house, there is a thunderstorm with a lot of lightning. Just a little while [later], the woman sees his face. She

¹Muslims fast in the month of Ramadan. During the Catholic liturgical year, certain fasts are also observed. Jainism has various types of fasting for followers to practise. Fasting is common among most Hindus, who individually have different periods of fasting depending on their beliefs and which gods they worship.

²In the early fifth century CE, four complete *vinayas* – 十誦律 *Shisong lü* (T.1435), *Sarvāstivāda*vinaya; 四分律 *Sifen lü* (T.1428), *Dharmaguptakavinaya*; 摩訶僧祇律 *Mohesengqi lü* (T.1425), *Mahāsāṃghikavinaya*; and 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (T.1421), *Mahīśāsakavinaya* – were translated into Chinese. For details, see Heirman (2007:167-202).

³This study particularly focuses on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (*Sifen lü* 四分律 T.1428) since, due largely to its strong promotion by Master Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), it has become a major reference point for monastic discipline in China. For details, see Heirman (2002:396-429).

is frightened and she thinks that he is demon. As a result, she has a miscarriage. When Kāḷodāyī says that he is a *bhikṣu*, the woman is very angry and she says that *bhikṣus* should not beg that late[.]⁴

Upon hearing of these incidents, the Buddha admonished Nanda, Upananda and Kāḷodāyī for their misconduct and then established a rule: If a [*bhikṣu*]⁵ eats at an improper time, [he] [commits] a *pācittika* (translated in Heirman, 2002:534).⁶ This leads us to ask why this particularly period of the day was chosen as the improper time. This issue has been discussed in the *Sapoduo pini piposha* 薩婆多毘尼毘婆沙 (*Sarvāstivāda-vinaya-vibhāṣā*):⁷

From midday to night is inappropriate.

From early morning to midday is proper. Why?...

From early morning to midday, it is the time for villagers to engage in all sorts of business and to prepare food.

From midday into the night, villagers hold parties and entertainments that cause *bhikṣus* troubles while wandering.

From early morning to midday, secular people engage in work, during which there is no defilement by sexual indulgence.

From midday to night, people take a rest from work and enjoy games or lovemaking, so that *bhikṣus* sometimes experience criticism and troubles.

From early morning to midday is the proper time for *bhikṣus* to

⁴Translation of T22.n1428, p662b08-c24 by Heirman (2002:562-563). For a detailed introduction to this precept in the Dharmaguptakavinaya, see Heirman (2002:498 n54-500 n56).

⁵Because the *bhikṣuṇī* order came into existence after the *bhikṣu* order, some of the *bhikṣuṇīs*' rules have been taken from *bhikṣus*'. For nuns, the rule against eating after midday is found in the *pācittika* rule 24 from the *bhikṣuṇīprātimokṣa* in the Dharmaguptakavinaya (T22.n1428, p735a27).

⁶A *pācittika* is a minor offence that needs to be expiated. See Heirman (2002:141-147).

walk into villages for alms-begging. From midday to night, *bhikṣus* should focus on meditation and *sūtra*-chanting, instead of entering villages...⁷

In other words, scripture explicitly defines and explains the proper and improper times for monastic members' interactions with secular people on the basis of the latter group's daily schedule. Begging for alms from villagers is thus to be engaged in before midday, after which time village life is likely to be marked by entertainment and sex; and this notion of appropriate and inappropriate times is also formative of the precept of fasting in Buddhism. However, the consumption of food at different times carries additional meanings. In the *Samādhi Sūtra* of Piluo, for example, King Bimbisāra asks the Buddha why he eats food during the middle of the day. The Buddha responds the king: Heavenly beings eat at dawn; the Buddhas of the three periods eat at noon; animals eat in the evening; ghosts and spirits eat at night. In order to eliminate the cause of six destinies (to be reborn in the six realms) for monastic members, the Buddha requires them to eat food at noon, which is the same mealtime as all Buddhas.⁸

From the above, it is clear that abstention from eating at an inappropriate time has a significant connection with spiritual cultivation as presented in Buddhist canonical texts. The precept of fasting is greatly emphasised and applied among the five categories of Buddhist monastics. The most junior, *śrāmaṇera* (male novices) and *śrāmaṇerī* (female novices) are expected to observe the ninth novice rule of abstaining from eating at the wrong time – the right time being after sunrise and before noon. A *śikṣamāṇā* (probationer) should take this precept of fasting even more seriously, because if she transgresses it, she must restart her two-year probation period.⁹ Refraining from taking food at inappropriate times also applies to *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*. In other words, all classes of monastic members commit a transgression by eating after midday, which illustrates the importance assigned to observance of this fast in the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*.¹⁰

⁷(T.1440). This sūtra is a detailed commentary on the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya, but its translator is unknown.

⁸T23.n1440, p551c5-c18.

⁹T54.n2131, p1173a24-a27

¹⁰Probationers occupy a status between novices and nuns, only applicable to women. During her two years of study, the probationer particularly has to take into account a certain number of special rules. In fact, the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* indicates that a *śikṣamāṇā* must follow the ten

This rule against eating after midday, however, is the source of an unresolved debate that can be traced back to the early days of Buddhism. Indeed, the rule has been a controversial issue since the Second Council, which took place approximately one hundred years after the Buddha's demise.¹¹ Nor has a consensus on this rule been reached in modern Chinese Buddhist communities: some monastic members (e.g. Master Hongyi¹² and Master Chan Yun¹³) have insisted upon strict abstinence from eating after midday, while others have taken a more flexible attitude (e.g. Shih Hsing Yun¹⁴, 2009:38; Wu Yin¹⁵, 2001:269).¹⁶ Some

precepts of a *śrāmaṇerī* and the six rules of a *śikṣamāṇā*, while she also has to take into account the rules for nuns. The Dharmaguptakavinaya (T22.n1428, p924b6–c2) comprises six rules for probationers, the first four of which are compiled in the same style as for *bhikṣuṇīs*: (1) not to have sexual intercourse; (2) not to steal; (3) not to kill; (4) not to lie about one's spiritual achievements; (5) not to eat at improper times (i.e. after noon), and (6) not to drink alcohol. For details, see Heirman (2002:67–75).

¹¹T22.n1428, p662c09–c18. It is, however, worth noting that Buddhist monks and nuns are allowed to take medicine after midday if they fall ill. Clarified butter, fresh butter, sesame oil, honey and molasses are the five types of medicine that monastic members are allowed to eat at proscribed times (T22.n1428, p0869c03–c09). According to the *Sifen lü shanfan buque xingshi chao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔 (An Abridged and Explanatory Commentary on the Dharmaguptakavinaya), sick monastic members are allowed to take irregular drinks after midday as medicine (T40.n1804, p0117c18–c19). These drinks are made from beans, grains or wheat cooked for juices; or oil, honey, syrup and fruit liquids, etc (T40n1804, p0118b05–b07).

¹²Dharmaguptakavinaya (T22.n1428, p968c18–971c02), Sarvāstivādaavinaya (T23.n1435, p450a27–456b08) and Mahīśāsakavinaya (T22.n1421, p192a26–194b20) all record this historical account of the Second Council (or so-called Council of Vaiśālī). For details, see Prebish (1974:239–254). Eating after midday was one of the disputed practices that caused the first schism in the Buddhist *saṃgha* in this Council. For details, see Pande (1995:23); Reat (1998:22); and Baruah (2000:6).

¹³Ven. Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942) is a famous Chinese Buddhist monk who deeply researched the vinaya and promoted the strict observance of monastic rules. For details, see Birnbaum (2003:75–124).

¹⁴Ven. Chan Yun 懺雲 (1915–2009) is a well-known monk in Taiwan who strictly adhered to monastic rules and played a key role in introducing Buddhism to university students. He established Zhaijie Xuehui 齋戒學會 (Academic Gathering to Keep the Fast and the Precepts) for Buddhist laity. For details, see Chün-fang Yü (2013:93–97).

¹⁵Ven. Hsing Yun 星雲 (b. 1927) is the founder of Foguangshan monastery, one of the largest Buddhist institutions in Taiwan. He greatly promotes Humanistic Buddhism and stresses Buddhist education and services by opening numerous temples and universities for both monastic members and (lay) people worldwide. For details, see Chandler (2004).

¹⁶Ven. Wu Yin 悟因 (b. 1940) founded the Luminary Nunnery (also Luminary Buddhist Institute) in 1980. She is well known for her research on vinaya, and runs a Buddhist college that provides education for nuns. For details, see Yü (2013).

scholarly work has explored the experience and enforcement of the prohibition against eating after midday in Chinese Buddhist contexts, via both historical sources (e.g. Mather, 1981:417-418; Tso, 1983:327-344; Gao, 2002:387-388) and empirical fieldwork accounts (e.g. Welch, 1967:111-112; Prip-Møller, 1982[1937]:221; Bianchi, 2001:81); yet, neither monastic members' *perceptions* of fasting, nor the external factors that may have influenced the way the rule is observed in Chinese contexts, have come under much scrutiny. As aptly put by Thomas Borchert (2011:187), “[m]any statements about the vinaya implicitly assume that what vinaya says is what occurs. If not followed by individuals or the community, then they are bad monks ... [yet] it is also true that monks break rules all the time. Sometimes there are social consequences ... though there is little discussion of why this may be so.” To address this absence, this study aims to offer a detailed and balanced overview of how the traditional monastic rule against eating after midday is interpreted and practised in contemporary Buddhist institutions in Taiwan and Mainland China.

As a female researcher, I was at an advantage when seeking access to Buddhist nunneries; partly for this reason, female monastic members became my main research subjects.¹⁷ Additionally, in recent decades, there has been a strong revival of Chinese Buddhism, amid which Buddhist nuns have exerted an ever-growing impact on the monastic environment, and their opinions have gradually become very influential. This runs parallel to developments in the secular world, where the influence of women has also grown significantly, for example, in some women's changed dietary habits – specifically, the eating of less or no food in the evening – apparently for the sake of good health. In selecting interviewees, I focused on senior (teacher) nuns, who exert a disproportionate impact on their younger colleagues and who also collectively provide each monastic institution with a unique concept of the rule against eating after midday.

Taiwan and Mainland China each have a rich monastic scene, but it is difficult or impossible to conduct fieldwork in all monastic institutions. It is, however, crucial to select purposive samples of specific Buddhist institutions to provide variety and a balanced overview. The nunneries have been carefully selected so as to encompass the major different types in the Chinese context, each with their

¹⁷As a rule, most books and articles today use the pinyin system to transcribe Chinese names, places and terms. We have done the same throughout this article. Still, when referring to Taiwanese authors or masters, we have opted to use their personal Romanization, as they appear on their websites, books or articles.

own representative characteristics and attitude towards disciplinary rules with a range of attributes:

1. *Vinaya*-based institutes, such as Nanlin Nisengyuan¹⁸ (Nantou, Taiwan), and Pushou Si¹⁹ (Wutaishan, Mainland China).
2. Buddhist nuns' colleges, such as Dingguang Si²⁰ (Guangdong, Mainland China), Chongfu Si²¹ (Fuzhou, Mainland China), Zizhulin²² (Xiamen, Mainland China), Qifu Si²³ (Chengdu, Mainland China), and Xiangguang Si²⁴ (Chiayi, Taiwan).

¹⁸Nanlin Nunnery 南林尼僧苑 was founded in 1982. There are about seventy resident nuns. It is a strongly *vinaya*-based nunnery, and well known for its rigorous interpretation and practice of monastic rules.

¹⁹Pushou Si 普壽寺, located in Shanxi Province, is a well-known *vinaya*-based monastery and now the largest Buddhist nuns' college in China (around 1,000 nuns), with a tradition of training *śrāmaṇerī* (novice) as *śikṣamāṇā* (probationer) before *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, and offering various *vinaya* study programs.

²⁰Dingguang Si 定光寺, located in Guangdong Province, opened as a Buddhist College with Master Honghui as dean in 1996. It was then promoted to the status of Guangdong Buddhist Nuns' College, the first of its kind in the Buddhist history of Guangdong. The college currently has more than 300 student nuns and twenty teacher nuns. Dingguang Temple provides teaching facilities and has become one of the largest colleges for Buddhist nuns in Mainland China.

²¹Chongfu Si 崇福寺, located in Fujian Province, is a well-known site for nuns' Buddhist spiritual practice, and Fujian Buddhist College for nuns was established in the temple in 1983. Currently, Chongfu Temple is the cradle for the cultivation of a new generation of Buddhist nuns and one of Mainland China's most famous Buddhist monastic institutions to confer ordination. Ca. 300 nuns live and undertake Buddhist study and practice there.

²²Zizhulin 紫竹林, also located in Fujian Province, belongs to Minnan Buddhist College, which is a well-known institution of higher Buddhist learning in Mainland China. Zizhulin Temple became Minnan Buddhist College for female monastic members in 1995; currently, more than 200 nuns live and undertake Buddhist study and practice there.

²³Qifu Si 祈福寺 is famous for its nuns' education, and is also known as Sichuan Buddhist Higher Institute for *Bhikṣuṇīs* 四川尼眾佛學院 (formerly located in Tiexiang Si nunnery, also in Sichuan). The previous abbess, Ven. Longlian 隆蓮 (1909-2006), played a key role in shaping contemporary Chinese nuns' views on, and practice of, monastic rules. She devoted herself to the education of Buddhist nuns for many years. Student nuns in this institute receive the *śrāmaṇerī* and *śikṣamāṇā* precepts and are required to strictly observe Buddhist rules and lawfully follow the Buddhist ceremonies of *poṣadha* (recitation of precepts), *varṣā* (summer retreat), and *pravāraṇā* (invitation ceremony held at the end of summer retreat). The college currently has more than 100 female monastic members (including teacher and students nuns).

²⁴Luminary Nunnery 香光寺 (also Luminary Buddhist Institute) was founded in 1980 by the nun Wu Yin (b.1940). It currently has approximately 120 nuns. Master Wu Yin, who is well

3. Humanistic Buddhist institutes,²⁵ such as Fagushan/Dharma Drum Mountain²⁶ (Taipei, Taiwan), and Foguangshan²⁷ (Kaohsiung, Taiwan).
4. A non-specific remainder category of institutes, such as Tongjiao Si²⁸ and Tianning Si²⁹ (both in Beijing, Mainland China).

This study constitutes an integral part of a broader study of the interpretation of disciplinary rules in contemporary Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese monastic institutions.³⁰ The research was undertaken via interviews and fieldwork observation, supplemented by the writings of contemporary nuns and monks. Analysis and interpretation were applied to nuns' interview responses and to their independently expressed views on the rule of fasting after midday and related practices.

known for her research on Vinaya, runs a Buddhist College that provides education for nuns.

²⁵Humanistic Buddhism encourages Buddhist monks and nuns to interact closely with the wider community. Some leading contemporary masters in Taiwan - such as the late Sheng Yen (Fagushan) and Hsing Yun (Foguangshan) - advocate Humanistic Buddhism through various objectives and activities, including monastic and secular education, welfare work and environmental protection.

²⁶Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagushan 法鼓山, abbreviated as DDM) is one of the largest Buddhist institutions in Taiwan, currently with about fifty monks and 200 nuns affiliated to the monastery. It was founded by the monk Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1930-2009), a prominent Chan master.

²⁷Foguangshan, recognized as one of the three largest monastic institutions in Taiwan, was founded by the monk Hsing Yun (b. 1927) in 1967. There are more than 1,000 monastic members affiliated to this monastery, which promotes Humanistic Buddhism in particular.

²⁸Tongjiao Si 通教寺 is a well-known and highly respected Beijing nunnery, whose members focus on vinaya study. Ven. Longlian 隆蓮 studied Buddhism in Tongjiao Si. It is now a place for Buddhist nuns' religious practice and study, holding the Seven-day Recitation of the Buddha's Name every month. Ca. thirty nuns live in the nunnery.

²⁹Tianning Si 天寧寺, also located in Beijing, is one of the earliest temples there, and is famous for its twelfth-century Liao Dynasty pagoda. In 1988, Tianning Si became one of the most important national cultural relic protection units. Currently, around thirty Buddhist nuns reside in this nunnery, which focuses on the combined practice of Chan and Pure Land methods. Ca. thirty nuns live in the nunnery.

³⁰This research has been supported by the Research Foundation of Flanders (FWO).

I. Analysis of the Fieldwork Data

The following sections present my research findings in detail, juxtaposing monastic practitioners' perceptions and practices of fasting after midday in Taiwan and Mainland China, to shed light on the wider viewpoints of the nunneries as institutions and to explore similarities and differences in the following of this rule within Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. To this end, I have categorised the fieldwork data into four distinct perspectives: 1) Chinese nuns' attitudes and practices with regard to fasting; 2) the impact of workload on the rule's observance; 3) adaptation of diet and local communities' expectations regarding vegetarianism; and 4) a typology of Buddhist institutions and leaders.

II. Chinese Buddhist Nuns' Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Fasting after Midday

Excluding those in *vinaya*-based nunneries, the majority of Buddhist nuns that I interviewed in both Taiwan and Mainland China took a relatively flexible view in regard to the monastic rule on fasting: for the most part, that it should be left to the individual to decide whether to follow it or not. At the same time, however, they expressed a positive attitude towards fasting, regardless of whether it was voluntary or enforced.

Pushou Si: “We do not eat a meal after midday. As Buddhist monastic members, we focus on religious practice and meditation. During the daytime, we need to study Buddhist *dharma*. In the evening, we start meditation after we finish work. We are less sleepy and muddled if we do not eat dinner, which is good for our body and mind while meditating.”

Tongjiao Si: “From the health point of view, it is detrimental to meditate if you eat too much in the evening, as you may feel sleepy or have bad digestion. It is better not to eat dinner if you don't have much physical work to do.”

Dingguang Si: “There are various advantages for our body and mind if we do not eat after midday Fasting can decrease the

stomach's burden, which is good for personal health [.]”

Chongfu Si: “People may have delusions if they eat too much. One saying is that those who are well-fed and well-clad breed lewd thoughts[.]”

Zizhulin: “You may feel sleepy or not be clear-headed if you eat too much, which can influence your religious practice in the evening. You are healthier if you eat less, or even do not eat, in the evening, so you may meditate better.”

In short, nuns in a variety of nunneries shared a similar perception of the advantages of not eating a surfeit of food in the evening, a perception that was closely linked to religious practice (e.g. meditation), physical health, and mental conditions. Fasting, in general, seems to be considered beneficial to human health, including that of the clergy, based on Buddhist scripture³¹ as well as scholarly work. For example, it is assumed by Hiroko Kawanami that fasting plays a key role in monastic members' longevity in Myanmar, based on her observation that Buddhist monks and nuns who fast have a longer life expectancy than local people (2013:96).³² In a similar vein, Melford Spiro explicitly mentions the benefits of fasting based on his informant monks' responses:

Food is prohibited after noon because ... it helps to control the mind, it decreases mental impurities, it promotes meditation, it provides more time for spiritual activities, it serves to distinguish monks from laymen ... It is instrumental in the acquisition of super mundane powers, it kills lust, it promotes the Buddhist religion, it promotes the attainment of nirvana, it decreases craving, it decreases emotional attachment[.] (1970:299)

³¹The prime example is from the Fayuan zhulin 法苑珠林 (Forest of Gems in the Garden of Law), compiled by Daoshi 道世 in 668 CE, which explicitly states five advantages of fasting: 1) less illness; 2) stability in the body; 3) less lust; 4) less sleeping; 5) rebirth in heaven (T53.n2122, p0954a19-a20).

³²It perhaps goes without saying that other factors (e.g. monastic practice, well-supported offerings from laity) might also crucially affect monastics' life expectancy.

Besides the positive health effects of fasting, my informant nuns from Pushou Si, Dingguang Si, Chongfu Si and Zizhulin all mentioned another advantage of this rule: no eating after midday significantly benefits others (e.g. *śrāmaṇerīs* and laypeople) because they will have more time and energy to study Buddhism or follow their own religious schedule rather than spending time preparing and cooking food all day for *bhikṣuṇīs*. Similarly, it lightens donors' financial burden if monastic members do not eat supper, a point raised by one Dingguang nun; this echoed Mohan Wijayaratna's study that monastic members who are excessive in their food intake cause more problems for the laity providing offerings. The Buddha usually admonished his disciples that their survival should not be "a burden on lay society" (1996:73). It should be clear from this that my interviewees considered the rule of fasting to be altruistic in character. However, a potential paradox appears here: why did most of the nuns I interviewed express a flexible attitude toward the observance or non-observance of the precept, despite recognising various advantages of not eating after midday, for others as well as for oneself? One of the key points frequently mentioned by my informant nuns was the factor of poor physical health, which prevented them from keeping this rule:

Tongjiao Si: "The nuns here keep this rule as their physical health allows. I still eat some fruit in the afternoon but never eat cooked food in the evening."

Tianning Si: "In this nunnery, some nuns are in good health so they do not eat after midday, while others may eat something called 'medical stone'³³ in the evening. Supper is quite simple. It doesn't mean those nuns do not want to keep the rule of not eating after midday, but their bodies do not allow them to keep the rule One Taiwanese senior monk, Master Huilü,³⁴ also kept this rule of not eating after midday, and it made him very ill."

³³Yaoshi藥石 (medicine stone) means supper. According to Fo Guang Dictionary, the Buddha dictates that monastic members should not consume food after midday. An evening meal is regularly served in Chan monasteries and it is euphemistically called 'medicine stone' to consider the food as nourishment for the frail body (1988:6691). For details, see Yifa (2002:248n28).

³⁴Ven. Huilü慧律 (1953-) is well-known to observe this rule strictly, but he has long had a serious, debilitating stomach condition which affected his religious life, so he finally decided to eat regularly for the sake of his health.

Dingguang Si (A): “I personally do not keep the not-eating-after-midday precept because of my illness, but I really respect those who do In my opinion, Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns should keep this rule but some are allowed not to because of ill-health. Most monastic members initially obey this rule for a long period of time; however, they do not look after themselves very well and it weakens their bodies, so they have to give it up.”

Dingguang Si (B): “I kept the rule before for a while but at that time I did not know how to take care of myself so that I messed up my stomach. Thus, I adopt a pattern of eating smaller, more frequent meals. Dietary guidance is necessary for monastic members on how to fast well.”

Chongfu Si: “It also depends on a nun’s physical condition whether or not she is able to practise this rule. Some student nuns take medicine in order to be able to keep this rule. Some who eat in the evening think of dinner as medicine to sustain the body, which is not the same feeling as eating food.”

Qifu Si: “Here, some monastic members do not eat food in the evening [to keep this rule]. Some eat an evening meal called a “medicine stone” if their physical conditions require it. The core of Buddhism is to let Buddhist followers practise the Middle Way ... [and] eat if their bodies need it.”

Clearly, it is inappropriate to generalise that fasting benefits all people’s health without any side effects. Significantly, the phenomenon of ill-health caused by fasting does not only exist in Chinese Buddhist communities. According to Hiroko Kawanami’s fieldwork in Myanmar, most Buddhist nuns strictly abstained from taking solid food after midday. Hunger from fasting was not a problem for most nuns, since their bodies got used to the practice. A few, however, developed gastric problems (1991:175). Moreover, Kawanami pointed out that gastritis was a “common ailment” among student nuns, to the point

that they had to take special food (*satúmadu*) to treat it (2013:97n21).³⁵ Kim Gutschow, researching Buddhist nuns in Zangskar in Northern India, found that many novice nuns could not observe the precept of fasting on physical grounds, even though they had tried to eat all their food before noon for a considerable period of time since their ordinations (2000:106). Some medical researchers confirm that peptic ulcer disease has been commonly diagnosed in Buddhist Thai monks (e.g. Tantiwattanasirikul, 2008:53-56). Nevertheless, a nun from Zizhulin opposed the opinion that fasting causes stomach illness, citing her personal experience. She did not agree that the rule set by the Buddha would make people physically unwell. She said she had kept the rule and stayed well ever since she started to teach *vinaya* for years. As we can gather from the above, there is no broad consensus, let alone absolute certainty, that fasting leads to a positive or negative impact on human health. It is indisputable, however, that monastic members are likely to perceive obstacles to their spiritual progress if they are in poor physical condition. One typical example is cited by the Buddha: before achieving enlightenment, the Buddha spent six years living an extreme ascetic life, only eating a grain of rice and a sesame seed per day. But this did not help his religious practice because he was in such poor physical health; so finally he accepted a shepherdess's offering of milk and ate food normally, albeit in moderation, to reach spiritual awakening. The Buddha stressed the Middle Way in his doctrinal teachings and religious practices, and Wijayaratna comments that "[a]n inadequate diet would have been inconsistent" with this general principle (1996:72). In light of this, it is especially interesting that my informant nun from Qifu Si also referred to the Middle Way in saying that fasting depended on individuals' physical needs. In any case, it is apparent that the question of fasting in Chinese Buddhism is a complex one that needs to be contextualized vis-à-vis contemporary society.

III. The Impact of Workload on Fasting-Rule Observance in the Context of Chinese Buddhism

In a comparative study of Sri Lankan and Thai Buddhist clergy who pay close attention to the "dietary schedule", Stuart Chandler comments that East Asian clerics "never" keep the precept of fasting after midday "to the letter", because

³⁵Satúmadu "is a sticky toffee-like fluid made from a combination of pyàye (honey), hnan-hsi (sesame oil), htàwbat (butter) and htanyet (molasses)" (Kawanami, 2013:70n21).

they assert that “their efforts in saving other sentient beings are too strenuous completely to forsake sustenance in the evening” (2004:179). To a certain degree, his remark resonates with my Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese data: in particular, some of my informants claim that they adopt a flexible stance toward the precept due to their busy monastic schedule and heavy workload.

Dharma Drum Mountain (A): “The Buddhist-education workload is quite heavy in this monastery, so we are not prescriptive about the rule about eating before noon. Some monks and nuns keep this rule if their physical health allows, and those who are less robust eat ‘medicine stone’ in the evening to sustain themselves.”

Dharma Drum Mountain (B): “Our monastery is open to laypeople for many Buddhist activities, which takes a lot of our physical energy... [W]e need to eat regularly to keep up our strength. Master Sheng Yen tells us we need to eat three meals a day to maintain good health.”

Luminary Nunnery: “In Chinese Buddhism, monastic members need to be able to serve and work, so they use more energy in comparison with those in Buddha’s time, when their ascetic life was spent in meditation.”

Tongjiao Si: “Some monastic members in southern China still do farm work or other jobs, so they need to eat dinner. However, in the Buddha’s time monastic members had less work.”

Tianning Si: “Buddhism in Theravāda countries is practised differently from our Mahāyāna Buddhism, though our main purpose is similar. We hold some Buddhist activities for laypeople, as a way of benefiting people. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, you cannot focus on your religious practice if it only benefits yourself. We have a greater diversity of work and activities [in Mainland China], whereas some [Theravāda] Buddhists spend more time on meditation.”

My fieldwork data touch upon several significant points regarding the precept of not eating after midday and its relationship to the value placed upon monastic work in Chinese Buddhism. First, the account of Chan monks' busy working lives can be traced back to the early Tang Dynasty,³⁶ when it was particularly highlighted in Chan Master Baizhang's well-known saying: "A day without work is a day without food".³⁷ Their work on self-sufficient monasteries' farmland³⁸ meant that Buddhist monastic members could not be criticised as "social parasites" by the Confucians (Yifa, 2002:73); and the Chan work ethic is quite prominent in the *Chanyuan qinggui*.³⁹

Whenever the monks are summoned to communal labour, all must work except the assembly hall chief and the Sangha hall monitor. If for some reason the abbot does not attend the work session, the rector has the abbot's attendant expelled from the monastery, unless the abbot is sick or entertaining officials and guests (Yifa, 2002:154).

This emphasis on communal labour is standard practice in Chinese (Chan) monasteries, and might well be a major influence upon adaptations to their members' dietary abstinence. According to Sze-Bong Tso, the prohibition against eating after midday was observed by Chinese monks after the transmission of the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* to China, during the Liang Dynasty and the early Tang Dynasty.⁴⁰ However, owing to the influence of Baizhang's

³⁶According to Kenneth Ch'en, Buddhist monks of the early Tang dynasty were involved in various business occupations. For details, see Ch'en (1964:261-271).

³⁷The monk Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (749-814) is said to have established a monastic code for Chan monasteries in the Tang Dynasty. However, the text of Baizhang's discipline no longer exists, which has given rise to much debate as to its authenticity among scholars. For details, see for example Heirman and Torck (2012:16n65) and Yifa (2002:28-35).

³⁸It is worth noting that monks personally working on monastic lands represent an ideal situation, since as Michael Walsh (2010:56) and Kenneth Ch'en (1973:142) point out, the actual cultivators of such land were mostly tenant farmers, monastery slaves and śrāmaneras working on monks' behalf.

³⁹X63.n1245, p0530c22-23. The *Chanyuan qinggui* 禪苑清規 was compiled by the Chan monk Changlu Zongze 長蘆宗曠 (?-1107?) during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). This is regarded as the earliest Chan monastic code in existence. For details, see Yifa (2002).

⁴⁰In total, fifty-eight monks are recorded as strictly fasting after midday in the Biographies of Eminent Monks, Further Biographies of Eminent Monks and Song Biographies of Eminent Monks. Sze-Bong Tso comments that these are the prominent examples of fasting, which is

code on monastic labour,⁴¹ most Chinese monasteries began to offer a later meal known as ‘medical stone’, to maintain the physical energy of monks (1983:341). Qian Gao points out that Dunhuang monks and nuns in the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods generally observed the rule, though not strictly: three meals a day, or perhaps snacks in the evening, were provided when monastic members did manual labour for monasteries or performed Buddhist rituals (2002:387-388). According to Welch’s fieldwork data from 1900-1950 China, monks still worked until late in the evening so most of them ate dinner or at least had some porridge (1967:111-112).⁴² Thus, it appears that the rule against eating after noon has only gradually been adopted in Chinese Buddhist contexts. It is worth remembering, however, that current Buddhist monastic members do not necessarily do as much farm work as in the past. As Chandler notes:

Ven. Baizhang’s maxim “a day without work is a day without food” has been broadened radically so that, rather than merely justifying farm work as suitable for monastics, it has become a paean exalting various forms of social engagement as an essential part, and potentially the highest form, of religious practice at Fagushan, [and] Foguangshan[.] (2006:188).⁴³

Indeed, many monastic members, particularly in large monastic institutions in Taiwan (and some in Mainland China), have busy schedules filled with various Buddhist activities, teachings and ritual services for laypeople and communities.⁴⁴ Engaging in relevant Buddhist *dharma* work is considered not only to benefit the promotion and development of Buddhism, but also to

difficult to practise in China. Indeed, these three biographies’ zealous reporting of certain monks’ ascetic fasting reflects the objective difficulty of adhering to the rule (1983:339-340).

⁴¹The eighth code: All members, whether junior or senior, must participate in communal labour (puqing 普請) (translated in Yifa, 2002:29).

⁴²Chinese monks in Baohua shan were served “hot water” after noon as congee (Welch, 1967:112). Prip-Møller conducted his fieldwork in Huiju Si where offered monks “to drink tea”, namely evening meals (1982[1937]:221).

⁴³In a similar vein, Master Wu Yin, the abbot of Luminary nunnery, has given Baizhang’s maxim a new interpretation by stressing that this is still applicable for contemporary clerics’ motto to live for the Three Treasures, Buddhism and enlightenment (Yü, 2013:147).

⁴⁴Owing to rapid urbanisation and modernisation in Taiwan, some urban nuns go to bed quite late – nearly at midnight – due to evening workshops or meditation classes. Yu-Chen Li comments that, ironically, laypeople who are much concerned with religion cause monastic members to have a restless busy timetable, which is harmful to their spiritual cultivation (Li, 2000:153-154).

impact upon monastic members' spiritual cultivation. Master Wu Yin stresses the importance of serving the monastery, citing a *vinaya* story in which one of Buddha's disciples, Dravya-malla-putra, who even had attained *arhat* status, was eager to work for the Buddhist community with *Bodhicitta* mind (T22. n1428, p0587a26-b05). Master Wu Yin also explains how nuns are assigned certain jobs in the management of the nunnery, indicating that working for the Buddhist *samgha* benefits an individual's salvation and merit accumulation (2001:282-283). While Master Wu Yin certainly does not expect her disciples to prioritise hard physical work, she highlights what she considers the appropriate balance between religious cultivation and monastery jobs.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that working for Buddhist businesses and rendering service to society may involve more physical activity than a life of reading and contemplation, to the point that the majority of my interviewees cite concern for physical health and nourishment as a reason for their flexibility in the observance of fasting after midday.

In discussing the relationship between monastics' working practices and fasting in Chinese Buddhism, one informant nun from Tianning Si explicitly pointed out that Theravāda monastic members may have different religious schedules from Chinese Buddhists, as their religious life might focus more on meditation. Her viewpoint exactly resonates with a strand of scholarly work indicating that Theravāda monks and nuns seem to focus more on sedentary activities: Buddhist learning, chanting, and prayer in a nunnery in Sri Lanka (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988:254); study, meditation and teaching for a monk in Burma (Spiro, 1970:306-307); chanting, study, prayer, begging for alms, and doing personal things for monks in north-eastern Thailand (Tambiah, 1970:117). Ven. Surapornchai Samacitto, a Thai monk, produced a case study of the Thai Dhammakaya Temple where newly ordained monks' daily schedule focused on more or less sedentary activities, such as begging for alms, cleaning the temple, confession, morning and evening chanting ceremonies, and meditation (2006:86).

More broadly, Prebish (2003:65) indicates that most monks in Theravāda countries do not work. Monica Falk provides *maechis*' daily

⁴⁵Stuart Chandler points out that some members of Foguangshan left the monastery because its monastic life was so busy that there was not enough time for "sufficient self-cultivation" (2004:209).

timetable,⁴⁶ which largely consists of chanting, study, teaching and meditation (2007:122). In this context, there is a significant correlation between physical activity and food consumption: Joanna Cook points out that the amount of food Thai monks and *maechis* eat in a day (breakfast and lunch) is sufficient for meditation (2010:136). In any case, it would appear that most Buddhist monastic members in Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka concentrate on more sedentary activities,⁴⁷ and this, to a certain degree, might explain why my informant nun from Tianning Si exhibited a defensive attitude towards the question of fasting after midday, which has been adapted due to the difference in the value placed upon monastic work between Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism.

IV. Adaptation of Diet and Locals' Expectations in Chinese Buddhism

In discussing the precept against eating food after midday, we must also consider wider dietary customs, as food plays an important role in Chinese culture and its place cannot easily be substituted. As aptly put by Roel Sterckx (2005:1), “[w]hen asked to identify one aspect of Chinese culture that has characterized so much of the cultural capital ... a preoccupation with food would no doubt rank among the most likely answers.” The consumption of food is absolutely one of the important foci in Chinese people’s daily lives; as Kwang-chih Chang remarks: “Chinese people are especially preoccupied with food, and ... food is at the center of, or at least it accompanies or symbolizes, many social interactions” (1977:15). It is in this context that the degree to which religious dietary restrictions (of which fasting after midday is just one example) exert an impact on Chinese Buddhists’ diets, and the degree to which these rules have been adapted to local conditions should be examined. Richard Mather remarks that “in China . . . which has always valued eating, the ideal of renunciation never really took root” (1981:418). One informant nun from Foguangshan stated her view on the relationship between Chinese eating culture and the precept of fasting as follows:

⁴⁶Maechis are religious women who, without being ordained as bhikṣuṇīs, live in nunneries. They observe eight or ten Buddhist precepts, shave their heads and wear white robes. On their wider role in Thai society, see Martin Seeger (2009:806-822).

⁴⁷It is worth noting that some of them might engage in social work, and that we cannot generalise and assume all Theravādan Buddhist clerics are not engaged in labour.

I think Chinese culture plays a key role in this issue: in China eating is the first priority in life. When Buddhism spread from India to China, Chinese Buddhist monastic members continued to respect *vinaya*, and came to think of eating after midday as “medical stone”, not dinner. This is the concept of a medicine meal which nourishes your body and gives you the five contemplations during mealtimes,⁴⁸ which is a good balance. The Chinese Masters were very wise: they respected *vinaya* and extended the spirit of Buddhist *dharma* into Chinese contexts by creating the monastic system and *qing gui*,⁴⁹ due to different (socio-cultural) conditions when Buddhism spread from India to China.

From this nun’s saying, it can be inferred that the precept of fasting has been skilfully modified to allow for expedient eating-as-medicinal intake to sustain physical needs, probably by medieval Chinese Chan monks seeking to bridge the gap between precept observance and the priority given to eating in Chinese culture. This clearly echoes Raoul Birnbaum’s comment that “[t]he Chinese Buddhist world has never been separate from Chinese society” (2003:113). Additionally, the Foguangshan informant’s statement serves as a reminder that Buddhism spread from India to China, which has its own culture and history. When the two cultures collided, with differences in time and space, Chinese monastic members seem inexorably to have adapted the Indian Buddhist inheritance regarding rule observance to the Chinese mainstream view. This process, however, was far from simple, and required cultural integration and re-innovation if it was successfully to maintain and expand Buddhism in Chinese contexts.

That being said, regulating the hours of eating appears not to be regarded as a key priority in the practice of Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that this attitude goes beyond mere local toleration of those who break the rule, and into a sense that the rule itself is foreign:

⁴⁸The Chanyuan qinggui X63.n1245.p0525c7-c8. The five contemplations are: 1. Considering the work required in producing this food, I am grateful for its sources; 2. If, on judging my virtues, no faults are found, then I regard myself as worthy of this offering; 3. May I guard my mind against faults, especially greed; 4. To cure the frail body, I consume this food as medicine; 5. To achieve cultivation, I receive this food (translated in Chandler, 2004:178). For the discussion of the five contemplations’ origin, see Yifa (2002:263n187).

⁴⁹Qing gui 清規, the so-called “rules of purity”, originated in the eighth century CE. They particularly focus on guidelines for large Chinese public monasteries (many belonging to Chan lineages), and many of the qing gui rules still follow the original *vinaya* texts. For details, see Yifa (2002).

Dingguang Si: “In Theravāda Buddhism, monastic members must not eat after midday. They are not allowed to go forth if they do not observe fasting. Those who eat after midday are seen to violate the root of the precepts and are discriminated against by people.”

Zizhulin: “The Buddha set up this rule for an original reason. But... [p]eople in China do not criticise Buddhist monks and nuns if they disobey this rule.”

Qifu Si: “Here we belong to Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, which expediently follows conditions for fasting. ... In Chinese Buddhism, eating after midday is allowable according to an individual’s condition.”

My informant nun at Dingguang Si explicitly pointed out that monastic members in Theravāda societies pay careful attention to the dietary schedule, which is closely related to monastic identity (as this relates to both strict *vinaya* observance and local people’s expectations).⁵⁰ Based on my fieldwork results, it is clear that my interviewees considered fasting to be the norm in most Theravāda Buddhist communities,⁵¹ in stark contrast with Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. Moreover, this has been the case for generations: “In China, the stress was not on the hours of eating but on the nature of the food” (Welch,

⁵⁰For example, Buddhist monks and religious women known as *maechi* in Thailand strictly abstain from eating after midday (Cook, 2010:136; Falk, 2007:121; Tambiah, 1970:118; Battaglia, 2007:252). In Myanmar, according to Hiroko Kawanami’s fieldwork results, those religious women known as *thilá-shin* seem to pay great attention to the precept of fasting, to avoid breaking the prohibition against eating after midday, which is considered key to *thilá-shin* religious identity (2013:96-97). In Sri Lanka, fasting is considered one of three “qualities or virtues” determining monastic identity (Abeysekara, 2002:135).

⁵¹While monastic members in Theravāda contexts are expected to adhere strictly to the rule of fasting, it does not mean that all actually do so. For example, although most Sri Lankan people may have an expectation that monks will fast after midday, some monks do eat meals in the evening as supper, but they must do so in private places. In other words, for monastic members in Sri Lanka to eat food publicly after midday is seen as “highly offensive” (Abeysekara, 2002:136). Similarly, one *bhikṣu* told Stuart Chandler that numerous monks in Sri Lanka privately consume “evening snacks” in their living quarters (2006:333n36). According to Richard Gombrich’s fieldwork observations in modern Colombo, besides their two regular meals (breakfast and lunch), most Sri Lankan monks eat snacks seen as “medicine” around six o’clock in the evening. This “medicine” is like drinking liquid within some food that monks do not need to chew it (1988:102).

1967:112). Stuart Chandler resonates with Welch’s data remarking that Chinese clerics would pay attention to what food they eat rather than the regulated fast (2004:181). From the above, including the statement made by my informant at Zizhulin, we can heuristically distinguish a key difference between practitioners of the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions regarding monastic identity: dietary schedule versus the nature of food consumed. In general, abstaining from all meat and fish as part of a lifelong vegetarian diet has become not only a major characteristic of Chinese monastic life, but has emerged as another modality of “fasting” in Chinese Buddhism.⁵² Indeed, as aptly put by John Kieschnick, “Buddhism is closely associated with vegetarianism in China and [vegetarianism] is an important part of Buddhist identity—monks, [and] nuns ... daily affirm their beliefs and distinguish themselves from others by their diet” (2005:186). Buddhist monastic vegetarianism in China, nevertheless, definitely could not have evolved into its current form in one step; rather, it has been facilitated by multiple key factors since the medieval period.⁵³ For example, lay devotees enthusiastic about the Buddhist doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, along with rulers including the Emperor Wu,⁵⁴ have played decisive roles (Kieschnick, 2005:202). From the sixth century down to the present day, monks and nuns in the Chinese milieu have been strictly required to have a vegetarian diet, to the point that if a monk or a nun is seen to eat meat, it will arouse widespread and serious public criticism, sometimes even in the media. Conversely, this criterion cannot apply in Theravāda countries (e.g. Ceylon, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand) where monks eat meat regularly and without adverse comment

⁵²Chinese Buddhists are also more influenced by Mahāyāna precepts and texts. For example, they not only follow vinaya but also observe bodhisattva rules based on the Fanwang jing 梵網經 (The Brahmā’s Net Sūtra). The third of its 48 minor precepts states that all Buddha’s followers and bodhisattvas are forbidden to eat the flesh of all sentient beings, and those eating meat will commit an immeasurable offense (T24.n1484, p1005b10-12). The Niepan jing 涅槃經 (Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra), meanwhile, says that “meat eaters cut off the seed of mercy” (T12.n374, p386a16).

⁵³For an overview of the history of vegetarianism, see Kieschnick (2005:186-212). For an introduction to the consumption of forbidden food in Chinese Buddhism, see Heirman and Rauw (2006:57-83). For an introduction to Buddhism and Chinese vegetarian culture, see Lin (2006:537-576).

⁵⁴Emperor Wu, during the Southern Liang Dynasty (502-549 CE), wrote the Duan jiu rou wen 斷酒肉文 (On abstinence from alcohol and meat), and issued a decree that Buddhist monks and nuns in China should not eat meat. Kieschnick remarks that the requirement that Chinese monastic members be vegetarian was crucially set by Emperor Wu’s efforts (2005:198).

(Kieschnick, 2005:187); rather, the most serious eating-related criticism of Theravāda monastic members occurs when the rule of fasting after midday is broken. For example, a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka, where breaking the rule is “highly offensive”, would be severely criticised for eating supper in a restaurant or other public place (Abeysekara, 2002:136). Clearly, laypeople hold very different expectations regarding monastic identity vis-a-vis fasting and vegetarianism in Theravāda and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist contexts. This resonates with Kieschnick’s comment that “in China, as elsewhere, the customs of monks and nuns were closely tied to the society in which they lived, and the efforts of interested lay people to shape their practice” (2005:202). The present discussion is a good example of how the locals’ ethos crucially affects modes of observing monastic discipline.⁵⁵

V. The Influence of Institutional Types, Leaders, and Teachers

Thus far, I have attempted to capture contemporary Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese nuns’ perceptions of and practices surrounding the rule against eating after midday. While most of my interviewees expressed a flexible attitude toward the rule’s observance, it would be incorrect to assume that all Chinese monastics pay little attention to it, or even that only a few follow it strictly. Rather, some of my informant nuns suggest that a number of members of non-*vinaya*-based institutions eat food only before noon if physical and contextual conditions allow. Additionally, it would appear that those who strictly abstain from eating food after midday mostly stay in *vinaya*-based institutions, which are known for rigorous interpretation and enforcement of monastic rules. Therefore, we could go so far as to argue that institutional types, their leaders and teachers exert considerable influence on how monastic rules – including the precept against

⁵⁵It is worth noting that while most Chinese people only demand that Buddhist monks and nuns eat vegetarian food and not that they fast, some masters have appealed to monastic members to fast strictly after midday. For instance, the *vinaya* master Jitao 濟濤 (1904-1978) commented that Buddhist monks and nuns would be criticised severely if laypeople saw them eating fish and meat, but only mildly if they were seen eating food in the afternoon. In Jitao’s view, monastic members should strictly observe precepts (including fasting) as a priority, irrespective of the severity or lack of severity of public condemnation (2005:82-83). According to my Nanlin informant, Master Hongyi 弘一 (1880-1942) and Guang Hua 廣化 (1924-1996) had difficulty making monastic members observe this rule of fasting in the early days of the Chinese Republic and in the early stages of Taiwanese Buddhism.

eating after midday – are practised. Nanlin nuns’ dietary style and strict rule observance are confirmed via fieldwork observation: they adhere strictly to the rule of eating food before noon here, beginning quite early (the wooden board was hit to summon the assembly at 10.20AM in the winter and 10.30AM at other times of year), and attempting to maintain traditional ascetic diets. The nunnery has built an alms hall in keeping with the spirit of asking for alms, which can also be hard to practise in the Chinese context. As the mealtime approaches the nuns assemble in the front of the main hall, each holding her own alms bowl, then quietly queue for lunch. Laypeople cook and serve the various dishes placed in each nun’s alms bowl, conforming to the rule that monastic members may only eat food that has been given to them.⁵⁶ The meal lasts for about an hour and a half to enable the nuns to eat as much as they need to, as this is their last meal of the day, and they must fast until early the next morning.

One Nanlin nun remarked that the precept against eating after noon has developed significantly as compared to the early period of Taiwanese Buddhism.⁵⁷ She was aware of this change due to Master Guang Hua’s teaching and influence.⁵⁸ Nanlin nunnery’s key guiding teacher, *vinaya* Master Guang Hua (1924-1996), who is widely recognised as one of the most influential monks in Taiwan, urged Buddhist monastics to practice *vinaya* rigorously. In his well-known book *Jie xue qian tan* 戒學淺談 (*Basic Discussions on Vinaya*), he emphasised the importance of the fast after midday because all the Buddha’s followers – laity, male and female novices, probationers, monks, nuns and *bodhisattvas* – should be bound by this dietary rule (2006:305-307). He

⁵⁶T22, no.1428, p0735a29-30. “If a bhikṣuṇī puts food or medicines that have not been given to her in her mouth, she [commits an offense], except if it is water or a toothpick, a pācittika” (Translated in Heirman, 2002:534-535).

⁵⁷Yu-Chen Li did her fieldwork in the Enlightening Light Convent 悟光精舍, another *vinaya*-based nunnery in Taiwan, where nuns also observe the fast strictly, much as in Nanlin Nunnery. For details, see Li (2000:151-152).

⁵⁸However, Master Guang Hua met difficulties while popularising the rule at that time. For example, in 1981 he held a post as the master (asheli 阿闍梨, ācārya) and taught śrāmaṇera precepts in the Ordination Hall. During the lecture, one preceptee asked Master Guang Hua about the rule of eating before noon, because the Ordination Unit did not pay attention to this rule, arranging quite a late lunchtime for the preceptees. Did that mean that the preceptees would be committing an offence if they followed the Ordination Hall’s lunch schedule? Master Guang Hua answered him honestly, “Yes”. The next day, more than half the preceptees did not eat the lunch which was served after midday. The Ordination Unit objected to Master Guang Hua’s teaching, and thereafter he was no longer invited to teach monastic rules in the Ordination Hall (Guanghua lüshi yonghuai ji, 2004:118-119).

criticised those who do not adhere to it, and in particular those who use the excuse that they are afraid of starvation and malnutrition. In his opinion, during the war of resistance against Japanese aggression (1937-1946), it is believed that most people ate two meals a day without starving to death; therefore, Buddhist monastic members committing the offence of breaking this rule will suffer in Hell after dying (ibid:309). However, Master Guang Hua also showed empathy for those monks or nuns who are ill or have digestive problems, saying they are the exception to this rule.

Pushou Si is a representative example of a Mainland Chinese *vinaya*-based nunnery, where it is well-known that female novices, probationers and nuns strictly abstain from eating food after midday. As in Nanlin, monastics in Pushou Si eat lunch starting around 11.00AM and then fast until early the next morning, around 5.00AM. Ven. Rurui, the abbess of this nunnery, admonishes her disciples to observe Buddhist rules strictly, and to pay careful attention to the precept of fasting: specifically, that Buddhist monastic members should rather die than eat food after midday. Ven. Rurui also cites Master Ouyi,⁵⁹ who wrote of the ten benefits of the precept against eating at undue times: 1) to eradicate the causes of life and death; 2) to manifest the meaning of the Middle Way; 3) to nurse one's health and experience less illness; 4) to revere religious practice; 5) to keep precepts firmly; 6) to enhance the capability of meditation; 7) to increase wisdom; 8) to avoid the realms of hungry ghosts and animals; 9) not to annoy donors; and 10) not to disturb lay attendants (2012:7-10). Additionally, one nun from Dingguang Si (a non-*vinaya*-based nunnery) expressed her view that nuns in Pushou Si usually do not perform heavy labour in the afternoon. Her saying implicitly reveals that Pushou Si could arrange its daily religious schedule to suit both rule observance and the physical and mental conditions of its members. In any event, we can see that Nanlin and Pushou nuns' strict observance of the fast is crucially influenced by the character and type of their institutions, and by those institutions' key teachers' expectations of their disciples.

Leaders and teachers in non-*vinaya*-based institutes, on the other hand, appear to have conceptions of mealtime that differ starkly from those in, for instance, Nanlin and Pushou Si:

Dharma Drum Mountain: “Our monastery is open to laypeople

⁵⁹Ven. Ouyi Zhixu 藕益 智旭 (1599-1655) was a famous monk of the Ming Dynasty who wrote various Buddhist works, focusing particularly on the doctrines of the Tiantai School.

for many Buddhist activities, which take a lot of our physical energy. It is not an ascetic institution, so we need to eat regularly to keep up our strength. Master Sheng Yen tells us we need to eat three meals a day to maintain good health.”

Luminary Nunnery: “In our nunnery, some nuns may wish to observe this precept, but Master Wu Yin is concerned that we may become ill, as many nuns are still young and would not get enough nutrition from only two meals a day. Our monastery is flexible in the observance of this precept on an individual basis.”

Chongfu Si: “Here, most student nuns who have received the *śikṣamāṇā* precepts obey this rule. However, we do not insist that student nuns do not eat after midday, as this religious practice is a matter for the individual[.]”

During my fieldwork observations, I ate with nuns in the Dharma Drum Mountain and Luminary nunnery and found that their evening meal consisted simply of leftovers from lunch. In Foguangshan and its branch in Taipei, Pumen Temple, three meals are provided;⁶⁰ this is likely to be related to the fact that Master Hsing Yun, the abbot of Foguangshan, has written that among the ten precepts of *śrāmaṇera*, some are difficult to observe strictly, including the precept of not eating after midday (2009:38-39). Whether obtained via interviews, observation or documentary sources, my data suggest that leaders and teachers in Humanistic Buddhist institutes and nuns’ colleges maintain flexible attitudes toward fasting, to the extent that their disciples can decide to eat after midday according to personal choice and physical condition. As Xiaochao Wang (2007:175) points out, religious organisations generally revere their founders or leaders, whose words, deeds and writings often become the basis for their institutional norms and systems. In the present context, this dictum helps us to understand how the institutional leader (Master Sheng Yen, Wu Yin, and Hsing Yun) and guiding teacher (in Chongfu Si) influences his/her disciples in their Buddhist beliefs and practices. In other words, this factor exerts considerable influence on how the rules – including the precept against eating after midday – are practised, and plays a crucial role in explaining how

⁶⁰For detailed introduction to dining conditions in Foguangshan, see Chandler (2004:178-183).

Chinese nuns may observe Buddhist precepts differently in various institutions, i.e., as a result of the leaders' or teachers' personal interpretation of each rule.

Additionally, it would appear that institutional types have also strongly influenced the way the precepts are observed. Dharma Drum Mountain, Luminary Nunnery⁶¹ and Foguangshan are more closely engaged with society, as they practise Humanistic Buddhism.⁶² My informant nuns in these institutions mentioned that they work and render service to society, which may involve relatively high levels of physical activity. This is in line with Humanistic Buddhism's institutional objectives of caring for and contributing to the community and the world, and ensuring the future of Buddhism. Sheng Yen and Wu Yin's greater flexibility with regard to their disciples' adherence to the rule against eating after midday may arise from concern for their followers' physical health and nourishment. On the other hand, the late Ven. Longlian maintained a flexible attitude towards fasting for her student nuns at Sichuan Buddhist Higher Institute for *Bhikṣuṇīs*,⁶³ apparently because she regarded this practice as purely voluntary, though the importance of an adequate diet – especially for young student nuns with many activities, including evening study – also played a role in the development of her stance (Religion in China, 1995:43; Bianchi, 2001:81).

The teacher nun at Chongfu Si does not require her student nuns to strictly observe the precept of not eating after midday, because she considers this to be

⁶¹The abbess of Luminary Nunnery, Master Wu Yin, has been greatly influenced by Taixu's and Yinshun's teachings, and has followed the ideas of Humanistic Buddhism (DeVido, 2010:91; Yü, 2010:191-224).

⁶²A detailed discussion of Humanistic Buddhism is beyond the scope of this research, but these are some general key points: a crucial role was played by Master Taixu 太虛 in the early twentieth century. He advocated "Life Buddhism" (rensheng fojiao 人生佛教) whereby Buddhist monastic members should contribute to society by involving themselves in the world through Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings (Schak and Hsiao, 2005:3-4). Master Taixu's revival movement has subsequently developed, yielding significant results particularly in Taiwan under his famous disciple Master Yinshun 印順 who arrived there after the Communist takeover of Mainland China in 1949. He continued to follow Taixu's reforming concept, but changed Taixu's previous slogan to "Humanistic Buddhism" or "Buddhism in the Human Realm" (renjian fojiao 人間佛教), and encouraged Buddhist monastic members to practice an active form of Buddhism in interaction with the social community (Chandler, 2006:185-186). Yinshun was also more concerned with the secularisation of Buddhist practice than Taixu had been (Jones, 1999:134). For details, see Pittman (2001).

⁶³The nuns' college which has recently been moved to Qifu Si, a newly built nunnery in Pengzhou, near the modern city of Chengdu.

a matter of individual religious practice. Her statements also implicitly manifest the fact that Chongfu Si, as a nuns' college, emphasises education and Buddhist doctrine more than strict adherence to *vinaya* practices. It would also appear that non-*vinaya*-based institutions in different settings and with various foci exhibit a greater variety of practices with regard to the precept of fasting than *vinaya*-based ones do. Indeed, each nunnery or monastery I have visited exhibits its own unique institutional characteristics and objectives, emphases on religious practices, and viewpoint on the observance of monastic rules. The diversity of opinions on the applicability of the rule against eating after midday reminds us of the wider problem of pluralism: the different attitudes and values surrounding the observation of precepts relate to varying conditions and contexts, religious practices, ways of propagating Buddhism (both individually and institutionally), the adaptability and flexibility of Buddhism, and the level of interaction between society and laity.

Conclusion

From the early period of Buddhism to the present day, the precept of not eating after midday has been the subject of considerable debate. Through a contextualised examination of how the rule against eating after midday is interpreted and practised in contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhist nunneries in Taiwan and Mainland China, I have identified variations that can be attributed both to the typology of Buddhist institutions and to crucial socio-cultural contextual factors (e.g. the importance to work and vegetarianism). While most of my informant nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China took a relatively flexible view of observance of the precept, some also stressed that there has been more adherence to fasting recently. Although the monasteries in which my fieldwork has been conducted are not representative of all Buddhist institutions in Taiwan and Mainland China, explorations of specific rules such as this one are potentially crucial to our understanding of the diversity of practices more generally, and for shedding light on that bigger picture. Most importantly, the practice of fasting after midday should not be interpreted in a reductionist mode, as part of a dichotomy between fasting and not fasting, since it has a number of complex implications that have been discussed above; nor can any one of these factors be isolated as a principal driver of current Chinese nuns' perceptions of and practices surrounding the precept.

On the other hand, some monastic members – in the Mahāyāna as well as in the Theravāda tradition – may strictly abstain from taking any solid food after noon as they think that this is fundamental to their religious identity. My fieldwork results, however, remain inconclusive with regard to the question of the precise relation, if any, between level of religious devotion and level of adherence to the fasting precept. One informant nun at Chongfu Si spoke explicitly about this matter: she was quite strongly against the idea that the mere fact of fasting or not fasting could or should be used as a yardstick of monastic members’ religious devotion, or even of the strictness of their adherence to monastic rules in general.⁶⁴ In her opinion, the rule against eating after noon is not the root of rules,⁶⁵ but (some) people nevertheless treat it as such to assess monastics. She said that she and other teacher nuns never judge a student’s religious devotion by whether or not they eat after midday, and instead judge them by how they treat people and other aspects of behaviour. Uniquely among my informants, this nun suggested that those who insist upon this rule may have themselves harbour thoughts of tasting food without peaceful and pure mind when they see other people eating. She concluded by saying that keeping this rule does not enable you to see clearly into someone else’s inner religious nature. Her viewpoint echoes the Sri Lankan monk Dhammadinna’s comment that he does not abstain from taking solid food after midday, a practice that “has nothing to with the Buddha’s philosophy” (Abeysekara, 2002:136). Dhammadinna likewise disapproved of Sri Lankan people only judging monastic identity according to the presence or absence of fasting, instead of paying attention to Buddhist monks’ “inner side” (ibid). In short, the question of fasting after midday – complex and controversial though it is – can provide, at best, a fairly superficial evaluation of individual monastic members’ religious devotion and level of rule-observance.

⁶⁴Her statement clearly echoes the views of the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain, Master Sheng Yen, who does not sanction the notion that following the rule of fasting after midday gives Buddhist monastic members superior minds (2007[1963]:188).

⁶⁵To kill, to steal, to have sexual intercourse and to lie about one’s spiritual achievement are such severe offences that any monastic who commits these transgressions can no longer remain a Buddhist monastic and is expelled from the saṅgha.

Abbreviations

- T. *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, J. Takakusu, K. Watanabe (eds.), Tōkyō. (CBETA) edition
- X. *Shinsan dainihon zokuzōkyō* 新纂大日本續藏經, K. Kawamura (eds.), Tōkyō. (CBETA) edition

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