

'FEMINIST' BUDDHISM AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FROM A CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: As the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals has proposed, eliminating all possible gender inequalities is of priority for a more sustainable and progressive human society. Buddhist religion cannot avert such a modern agenda. But how such a goal can be achieved varies hugely, especially in the Chinese context. Rather than seeing the rise of 'Feminist' critique of Buddhism in both mainland China and Taiwan as homogeneous to Western feminist movements in religion, this article tries to reveal the diverse approaches of Chinese Buddhist elites to reconcile gender equality issues with Chinese Buddhist doctrines and other traditions in China. In particular, this article shows that certain Buddhists in mainland China deny the possibility of launching a Western-like 'Feminist' purge of Buddhism and argue that for sustainable development of both Buddhism and Chinese society, Buddhist traditions should not be put in the opposite to gender equality. It means that not only a separation between normative Chinese Buddhism and Buddhism as a social reality is needed, but that within the sphere of normative Buddhism, the 'worldly dharma' and the 'transcendental dharma' should be treated with more nuanced perspectives.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism, Feminism, Gender Equality, *Garudhammas*, Taiwanese Buddhism.

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1. Introduction

In the United Nations' new 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (2030 SDG)' announcement, an institutionalised gender inequality ubiquitous in human society is mentioned and seen as one of the major obstacles to the progress of a sustainable human civilisation:

Realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels. We will work for a significant increase in investments to close the gender gap and strengthen support for institutions in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women at the global, regional and national levels. All forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls will be eliminated, including through the engagement of men and boys. The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial (United Nations 6).

The United Nations' 2030 SDG may be seen as the manifestation of a modern 'common sense' towards gender inequality and women's dilemma in our society. It means that institutionalised inequality of gender should be recognised on governmental and political levels globally and be 'eliminated' for the sake human civilisation progress. Such an advocate is certainly not something new in the twenty-first century, and in many cases, religion as an important social institution cannot be excluded from this mission of women empowerment. However, in the specific and sometimes unique context of religion, how to balance religiosity and social and ethical equality becomes a rather sensitive and delicate issue. Chinese Buddhism, as one of the major religions in the Chinese-speaking world, has been making responses to such a call for decades, yet in my article, I wish to show that the way in which Chinese

Buddhism, particularly Mainland Chinese Buddhism, responded to this modern enterprise of 'eliminating gender disparities is more flexible than one could imagine in a modernist dichotomy between absolute equality and inequality. This means that how different religious communities receive and transform the concept of 'empowerment' of women and 'eliminating gender barriers' vary.

In the long history of Buddhism in both India and East Asia, the role of women in Buddhist doctrines and practices has always been a complex issue. Often traditional Chinese Buddhist gender discourses are interpreted as androcentric or even misogynistic. Despite the religious ideal that any sentient being could attain Buddhahood regardless of gender and any other kind of social status, certain Chinese Buddhist monastic and lay masters still exhibit binary views on women. In the massive movement of 'modernising Chinese Buddhism' in the early twentieth-century Republican period, Chinese Buddhist gender discourse was massively revised due to new Buddhist elites' collective memory of a 'patriarchal' Chinese Buddhism in the past. During this intense period of reforming Chinese Buddhist doctrines, the translated concept of 'Feminism' (in a particularly Euro-American sense) was introduced to the Chinese Buddhist intelligentsia. Feminist critique soon became an emerging theme in the grand narrative of reforming and modernising Chinese Buddhism. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and decades of political chaos and persecutions of religion, Chinese Buddhism has embraced significant growth since the end of the twentieth century. New social conditions and thoughts forced Buddhist communities in China to transform traditional doctrines to accommodate Chinese Buddhism's contemporary audiences, and Feminist critique gradually appeared as an important theme in this kind of discussion.

However, despite the fact that new Western and East Asian Feminist theories have been introduced into China and certain Chinese Buddhist feminist discourses were originally initiated or stimulated by these foreign intellectual debates, the Chinese Feminist-Buddhist movement does not follow a purely 'reformist' and 'anti-tradition' path. I wish to show in this research that

although feminist-Buddhist critique in contemporary China is clearly a modern construction, it does not fully embrace the Western sense of progressive religious modernity in terms of empowering women and advocating religious gender equality for more sustainable social developments. Therefore, the complexity and sometimes even inconsistency among different voices in this debate on gender equality in Chinese Buddhist communities entails a kind of Buddhist 'Feminism' that hugely differs from its Western counterparts. Nonetheless, in indigenous voices, the agenda like "eliminating gender disparities" and "Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels" (United Nations 18) proposed by the UN are still considered as valid goals in some female Buddhists' eyes.

2. Women in Traditional Chinese Buddhist Doctrines

The issue of unequal gender narratives in Buddhism has been noticed by many scholars recently. Alan Sponberg concludes that in early Indian Buddhist texts, attitudes toward women contain three inter-related facets: "soteriological inclusiveness; institutional androcentrism; [and] ascetic misogyny" (8). Although women are considered theoretically equal to men in the path of enlightenment in an early Buddhist context, women are actually hierarchically inferior and defiled. They are thus excluded from certain religious achievements. Being born a woman is also considered a result of bad karma. As women are additionally understood as naturally lacking wisdom, in certain later developments of Indian Buddhist texts, women are represented as incapable of becoming Buddhas (Romberg 163-166). This is a doctrine that early Chinese Buddhism took on and developed, possibly under Confucian influences, in order to construct women as physically and mentally obstructed and incapable of attaining Buddhahood (Kajiyama 53-70). Some medieval Chinese Pure Land Buddhist masters inherited this gender discourse but made certain revisions so that female Buddhist practitioners would not be totally excluded from rebirth in the Pure Land, even though the female body is still considered as morally and religiously degenerate (Chen 1-44). However, this

androcentric gender discourse was not fully inherited in later monastic writings without any adjustment. One may even argue that the misogynistic Pure Land doctrine could have been a specific medieval Chinese invention rather than a view explicitly expressed in Indian texts, and this doctrine in China was not unanimously followed by monastic and lay Buddhist elites (Harrison 553-572). Ding-wa E. Hsieh argues that during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), monastic male Chan Buddhist writings, especially Chan biographies, started to focus more on women's spiritual and religious accomplishments; they tried to reconcile the tension between the Chinese Buddhist misogynistic doctrine and the gender equality in attaining Buddhahood (166-171). Certain non-binary gender narratives co-existed with androcentric doctrines in Chinese Buddhist texts.

Nonetheless, this kind of gender-inclusive view developed since the Song cannot be extended to a modern sense of 'feminist' perspective on women. Certain Chinese Buddhist scriptures since medieval China still endorse the idea that women could only get enlightened by transforming their bodies into men (Balkwill 142-143). Many male monastic and lay elites of Chan and Pure Land schools agreed with the doctrine of female inferiority out of different reasons, one of which being pressures from patriarchal Confucian detractors of Buddhism (Jian 133-197; Wang 1-18). The misogynistic view co-existed with certain male Buddhist elites' efforts to include women in the normative discourse of Buddhist practices until the late Qing dynasty (1636–1912 CE). But after the fall of Qing and the 'modernisation' of Chinese society, a more radical view was introduced and the issue of 'empowerment of female Buddhists' became more salient than it was before.

3. Voices in Republican and Taiwanese Buddhist Communities

During the Republican period (1912-1949 CE), Chinese Buddhist communities faced a new and rather challenging social environment after the fall of Qing dynasty and the 'collapse' of the traditional Chinese society, which forced certain prominent Buddhist elites to reform Chinese Buddhist doctrines and Institutions. Master Taixu (1890-1947) was one of the most well-

known pioneers of the 'modernisation' of Chinese Buddhism, who systematically established modern style Buddhist seminaries and made considerable efforts to reconcile traditional Chinese Buddhist teachings with modern Western socio-political thoughts (Pacey 149-169). In his proposal of a 'human-centred' transition of Chinese Buddhism, more secular and humanistic topics that previous traditional Chinese Buddhist discourses ignored take up a significant proportion, and the issue of women's empowerment in the modern era is one of the crucial topics. However, Taixu's views on the relationship between Buddhism and modern women do not look as radical and 'progressive' as his other reformist proposals; he only mediated between the traditional view of male superiority and women's liberation in modern societies (Valussi 158-159). In his very famous lecture 'How to Become a Modern Women,' Taixu did encourage young women to step out of family life and actively pursue education and social responsibilities; but at the same time, he claimed that women are also responsible for maintaining domestic harmony in family life (Taixu 1324-1332). This means that Taixu's idea of gender equality and the women empowerment, although aimed at making a response to gender theories in the West, it was never fully derived from the Western sense of 'jus natural'; conservative views of gender hierarchy are still given a place in Taixu's gender views (Chang 685-700). Apart from Taixu, a contemporary Pure Land master, Yinguang (1862-1940) was strongly against women's liberation in a modern sense and advocated conservative Confucian gender morality for his religious community to resist a more modernised society (Valussi 159). It seems that at the beginning of Republican Buddhist reforms, male Chinese monastic Buddhist elites held reluctant views on supporting absolute gender equality from a Buddhist perspective.

However, certain female disciples of Taixu exerted a more radical method to transform Chinese Buddhist gender discourse. In the first Buddhist journal dedicated to female Buddhists in China, *Dedicated Journal for Female Buddhists (Fojiao nüzhong zhuankan)*, female authors published provocative articles to interpret ideal Buddhist females in the scriptures as models of Buddhist absolute gender equality and liaise it with the translated modern term

'Feminism' (*nüquan*) (Yuan 384-395). This is even accompanied by the recognition of women's political rights, social roles, and cultural identity as equal to men. According to these authors, this kind of interpretation of the doctrine of ubiquitous Buddha-nature in all sentient beings as absolute gender equality should be a part of the national movement for women's liberation. Although these more 'progressive' and 'Feminist' debates were impacted by Taixu's proposal of modernising Chinese Buddhism, they embraced a more extreme version of female empowerment.

After 1949, a similar kind of 'Feminist' Buddhist movement was continued in Taiwan under Taixu's name (Huang and Weller 387-390). Certain Taiwanese Buddhist figures later cast a huge impact on Mainland China's Buddhist communities after the opening-up reform during the 1980s, and many of them still show great influence on today's Buddhist world on the Mainland. One of the most well-known Taiwanese figures who first brought Taixu's enterprise of 'human-centred' Chinese Buddhism back to the Mainland after decades of political chaos and persecutions of religion is Master Xingyun. Xingyun, in the past decades, almost became an authoritative voice in the transformation of Buddhism from a victim of political restrictions and marginalisation to a restored but also modernised national religious institution (Laliberté 123). In Xingyun's preaching of Taixu's enterprise as his direct dharma heir, he nonetheless avoided Taixu's self-contradicting gender view and is more prone to be sympathetic toward 'Feminist' interpretations of Chinese Buddhist gender culture. In a lecture called "Does Buddhism Talk about Feminism? Respected Women in Buddhism," Xingyun argues that both conservative views on ideal women as good wives and mothers and 'progressive' views celebrating successful Buddhist female leaders are respected in Chinese Buddhism as different life choices in different times (Xingyun, "Fojiao jiang nüquan ma?").

Xingyun's stance may be an intermediary between Taixu and a more gender-egalitarian and liberal modern Chinese society and representative of certain male Buddhist elites, but this is not the only kind of modernised Buddhist gender view imported to mainland China from Taiwan in the past decades. Not all

Taiwanese activists hold a moderate view of the dichotomy between traditional gender stereotypes and modern gender discourse in China. Another famous female monastic critique Zhaohui is drawing more and more public attention in both Taiwan and the Mainland as a radical 'Feminist' Buddhist who stands totally against any kind of patriarchal convention in Chinese Buddhist traditions and is a supporter of 'Feminist' reform of Buddhism in a Western sense (Chen 16-32). One of the most well-known and controversial proposals she made and circulated on mainland Chinese websites is an article called: "Deconstruct Male Chauvinism in Buddhism." Zhaohui argues that there had long been a kind of androcentric perspective in so many Buddhist traditions in the past, including the disciplines to force nuns to pay extra respect to monks known as the 'Eight Garudhammas' (*Bajing fa*). According to Zhaohui, this long-standing androcentrism in Buddhism should be completely abandoned to stop certain doctrines from hurting female believers since androcentric doctrines are not suitable in the modern world at all. She initiated her radical 'Feminist' movement by advocating the abolishment of the 'Eight Garudhammas,' which led to huge controversies in both Taiwan and the Mainland.

Surprisingly, the re-evaluation of the 'Eight Garudhammas' is also proposed by Xingyun from a vaguer and more moderate stance (Xingyun, "Nüren shichang"). In fact, in his open lecture in the 1990s, Taiwanese monk-master Shengyan already mentions that out of the pressure of Western 'Feminist' criticisms and a changing society, Chinese Buddhist communities have to rethink the validity of certain androcentric Buddhist traditions, including the 'Eight Garudhammas' (Shengyan). Yet Shengyan made a narrative of this proposal in a more conservative manner, indicating that it was not Buddhism or Buddha's fault that these seemingly misogynistic elements were invented and carried on since, in both of the essential Mahayana and Theravada teachings, gender is a mirage, and for an enlightened Buddhist saint, the myriad things are equal and empty, not to mention males and females. Shengyan only proposed this rethinking of Buddhist androcentrism as a passive reaction to mainly Western and

Japanese 'Feminist' criticisms rather than Buddhism's own active transformation. We can see that when Taiwanese monastic Buddhist activists' voices on women transmit in Mainland China, they, out of different motives and using different approaches, reach a similar conclusion that in a modern world, androcentric and misogynistic Buddhist traditions on both monastic and lay females including the 'Eight Garudhammas' should at least be given a second thought. In fact, Heirman and Chiu have pointed out that in many nun monasteries in Taiwan today, the 'Eight Garudhammas' are either understated or completely renounced, and gender equality in monastic communities seems to be a shared understanding in different Buddhist institutions (283-295). The continuous movement for gender equality initiated during the Republic period resulted in a relative unanimous understanding of reforming Buddhism in Taiwan, and under the strong influence of Western 'Feminist' critique, monastic authorities and scholars have made their responses to the changing social atmosphere. This women empowerment issue was brought up long before Mainland Chinese Buddhist communities realised the importance of gender equality in Buddhism during the 1980s-1990s.

As we can see, there is a strong tendency in Taiwanese Buddhist communities to revise Chinese Buddhist doctrines according to a new Anglo-American gender discourse. Be it political or not, the endeavours made by certain communities in Taiwan to make Chinese Buddhism looks more 'modern' and international may have resulted in their anxiety towards their religious ancestor: the old version of Chinese Buddhism, which is still dominating Mainland China. This anxiety perhaps motivated some of the prominent figures in Taiwan to actively transmit their reformist voices online to Mainland Chinese communities, aiming at leading a new wave of 'revolution' of Chinese Buddhism so that the tension between a 'modern' Taiwanese Buddhism and a 'traditional' but somehow 'backward' Mainland Buddhism could end. But in this religious project, problems still remain. If we take a close look at the influential articles written by Taiwanese authorities mentioned above, we can see that one of the major issues in their advocating of gender equality in a Buddhist context

is that almost all of them, regardless of how radical they are on the issue of 'Feminism', considered the modern concept of 'gender' as biologically and socially binary. Since this was already something established in the Western 'Feminist' critique at that time, it seems that the majority of the Taiwanese Buddhist leaders took this concept for granted. However, this is the exact point where Mainland monastic authorities reversed the argument and falsified this 'Feminist' understanding of the Buddhist gender view.

4. Contemporary Feminist Buddhism in China

Prominent Taiwanese monastic elites drew Mainland Buddhists' attention after they were introduced to mainland China, and their gender equality views gained support online and off-line, but many people still struggle with the contradiction between the ultimate Buddhist teaching of non-duality and the misogynistic elements in it ("Nüquan zhuyi zhe"). Chinese supporters for the total abolishment of androcentric and misogynistic elements in Buddhism praise Buddhist communities and institutions in Taiwan and the West, arguing that China, like any other society experiencing high modernity, should also follow this path to systematically recognise the importance and absolute equality of female Buddhists and let women start to take important administrative roles in monastic and lay communities independently ("Fojiao yu nüquan zhuyi"). Their agenda and narratives are highly influenced by not only Taiwanese Buddhist elites but also Anglo-American 'Feminist' Buddhist theorists like Rita Gross. Originally, Gross proposed her famous idea of the separation between Buddhist teachings and Buddhist social practices under the influence of the secular feminist movement, calling for the modification and abandonment of certain androcentric/misogynistic disciplines and terminologies in Western Buddhist communities (Gross 91-133). But some extreme feminist Buddhists in online discussions also try to prove that even in the Buddhist doctrines transmitted from India and Inner Asia to China in the early days, misogynistic elements still exist, so a feminist modification of Buddhism should not treat Buddhist teachings and its social history separately ("Fojiao zhong"). Other

feminist detractors of Buddhism point out that Buddhism, in its core, is misogynistic, although certain efforts were made by Buddhists in ancient times to alleviate gender inequality which separates Buddhism from other more misogynistic religions ("Nüzi yao zhuan nanshen"). This means that reformist views do have their audiences in Mainland China on the issue of gender equality in Buddhism, and the reformist agenda clearly fits the narrative of Buddhist gender issues in Taiwanese and Western 'Feminist' Buddhist movements.

However, this is not the whole picture of 'Feminism' and Buddhism in Mainland China. One would wonder what about indigenous Buddhist authorities, especially female monastic scholars' opinions on this issue? Ester Bianchi points out that in the veneration and 'saint-making' process of Longlian, the most famous Buddhist nun in modern China, Longlian is depicted as both an independent, anti-patriarchy woman and, at the same time, an accomplished nun who defended the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and refused any radical reforms to Buddhism in China, which reflects Longlian's own intention on how her life should be represented ("Subtle erudition," 304-308). As an exemplary female figure in modern Chinese Buddhism and a well-educated female elite during the Republican period, Longlian's dual image shows that although she identified herself as a 'modern' independent woman in the secular sense, she did not intend to challenge any Chinese Buddhist convention. In an interview with her biographer, Longlian explicitly expressed her approval of the ostensibly 'misogynistic' elements in Chinese Buddhism. In this interview, the interviewer asked a series of provocative questions about the misogynistic doctrines in Chinese Buddhism and their incompatibility with modern society. However, Longlian claimed that gender inequality is a social reality and probably impossible to eradicate, and Buddhism is only neutrally reiterating this reality rather than making its own misogynistic view (Qiu 284-285). Longlian not only suggested that the additional rules on nuns, including the 'Eight Garudhammas,' should be strictly followed but also tried to justify the Buddhist concept of women's natural 'obstacles' in gaining enlightenment. She argued that this idea of

'woman's obstacles' does not only refer to 'woman' as a biological and social gender category but also as a mental status that could exist in both sexes but is only more visible among women. Therefore, to Longlian, the Buddhist idea of 'woman' could refer to a negative or inferior psychological status seen in both genders that is represented in a men/women metaphor. This dual metaphor is merely a reflection of the unequal world we live in rather than invented by Buddhism, and the kind of 'womanly' psychological status which obstruct non-dual enlightenment exists in every sentient being's mind. Therefore, Longlian suggested that there is no need to attack Buddhism for being misogynistic or urge Buddhism to make a change; on the contrary, when the society is becoming more equitable on human beings' biological distinction, social hierarchy, and mentality related to gender change, then such a change will naturally be reflected in Buddhism without any deliberate reforms.

Similar views of understanding the Buddhist sense of 'woman' as a psychological status is also seen in another Mainland Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanhua Shangren. Famous for his conservative and sometimes even anti-modern stance, Xuanhua Shangren explained that the reason why the female body is regarded as inferior in Buddhism is that the female body and biology are seen as a reflection of certain mental status (Xuanhua). He believed that if one's psychological status can be transformed, then the gendered body will change accordingly. Similar views appear in the online discussions of defending conventional Chinese Buddhist gender views and doctrines in Mainland China. Defenders of Buddhist traditions argue that the so-called 'women's obstacles' obstructing enlightenment are not limited to women but a mental condition in both genders but only more likely to be directly detected among women, but what is different in their argument from Longlian's is that in certain circumstances, women's biology does generate more difficulties in Buddhist practices than men's ("Nanshen qibao, nüshen wulou"; "Fojing li de 'nüzhuan nanshen'"). This means that to supporters of traditionalist views, the simplistic division of gender only based on visible bodily differences in radical feminist Buddhist theories ignores the fact that the concept of gender is

multifaceted in a normative Buddhist context. This also means that to traditionalists, gender equality seems to be a 'pseudo-proposition' unless somatic and psychological gender differences can be eradicated in human society, and the radical 'Feminist' Buddhist approach to reform contemporary Chinese Buddhism lacks the respect for such differences. Moreover, they tend to see normative Buddhist gender views not as an active construction by previous Buddhists but as a neutral reiteration of human beings' social and biological reality. In this sense, Buddhism is not an active agent that creates normative rules on gender and the social practices that perpetuate gender inequality. Rather, Buddhism provides a path to transcend all dualities based on the recognition of dualities.

Accepting gender difference as reality is also used as a strategy for some monastic traditionalists in Mainland China to defend the 'Eight Garudhammas'. Traditionalists argue that Buddha originally made these disciplinary rules to protect nuns in a society very hostile to female religious practitioners, and there was no intention to suppress or belittle women ("Bajing fa shizai qishi nüxing ma?"). Some even argue that Buddha designed these rules to help female Buddhists subjugate their arrogance, and if arrogance towards females grows among male monks because of the 'Eight Garudhammas,' then it only shows that the 'Eight Garudhammas' should be seen as a mutual 'compact' between nuns and monks which also put restrictions on monks ("Qiantan 'hexie'"). If one truly transcends all dualities, then one does not see gender in anything, but only non-selfish respect for all sentient beings, and it does not matter to an enlightened one whether the 'Eight Garudhammas' is about gender inequality or not since the issue of gender is irrelevant ("Bajing fa shifou bu minzhu"). Otherwise, by actively overthrowing a so-called extant duality, one only creates new dualities such as the 'modern' and the 'traditional', the 'backward' and the 'progressive', the 'sexually distinctive' and the 'sexually indistinctive'.

We can see that rather than following the Western and Taiwanese 'Feminist' Buddhist discourse, many Mainland Chinese Buddhist elites and traditionalists have made great efforts to

maintain Buddhist traditions intact in the modern world. Mainland Buddhist authorities and scholars are cautious about Buddhism's radical changes or reforms and try to complicate the connotations of certain controversial doctrines, including those related to gender hierarchy. Their comments and speeches circulated online create a counter-discourse to the 'Feminist' Buddhist advocates and reformists following the Taiwanese Buddhist communities' path. Figures like Longlian intend to make a narrative of women empowerment without directly negating Chinese Buddhist traditions.

Studies have shown that the 'Eight Garudhammas' were perhaps never strictly practised in Chinese history, and they had never been a controversial issue before the modern period in China (Wang 46-48). Antagonising Buddhism with gender equality would impair the validity of Chinese Buddhism as a continuous and legitimate tradition in contemporary China. Unlike Buddhism's situation and social position in Taiwan and the West, Buddhism has already suffered from severe political disruption in Mainland China for decades, and critiques outside China have constantly been criticising the loss of its tradition. In the process of restoring Buddhism in the post-Mao era and struggling for legitimacy, various traditions have been 'reinvented' to re-establish a systematic normative Buddhism, which is the opposite of the reformist enterprise in Taiwanese Buddhism (Bianchi, "Transmitting", 152-170). This means that on the matter of reconciling the restoration of Buddhist tradition and accommodating modern social changes, traditionalist Buddhists in Mainland China refuse to homogenise what gender means in a Buddhist context with what 'Feminist' reformists mean by gender. By deconstructing a gender-oriented critique of Chinese Buddhism, the issue of misogyny and androcentrism is made irrelevant in traditionalists' discourse. In other words, when Western and Taiwanese Buddhist reformists are trying to flag the discrepancies between normative Buddhist teachings and Buddhist social realities on the issue of gender, Mainland Buddhist traditionalists tackle this problem from a completely different angle: that there is no such thing as 'Buddhist social realities,' but only secular social

realities reflected in Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism did not create an inferior religious gender identity for women but only offered methods to transcend the extant dualistic afflictions that are already there.

We may see the Mainland side of this argument as a reflection of how religions respond to the modern agenda of 'eliminating gender inequalities.' Mainland monastic authorities clearly do not see human society as static or Buddhism as unchanging. However, as to the matter of whether Buddhism is a part of perpetuating gender inequality, their answer is negative since Mainland authorities deny that Buddhism actively created any unequal social circumstances. In this kind of argument, it is not the Buddhist gender view as a part of the unequal gender condition in Chinese society that should be eliminated; rather, it is a social problem neutrally reflected in Buddhism that should be eliminated, perhaps under the instruction of crucial Buddhist doctrines. Nonetheless, if we accept the narrative on the Mainland side, then the question is that how should common Buddhist believers treat doctrines like the 'Eight Garudhammas'? If 'Eight Garudhammas' is only a reflection of a gender-unequal society in the past, should Chinese Buddhist nuns disobey such a set of rules in a more equal modern society? If 'Eight Garudhammas' is something innately 'Buddhist', then how could one say that it is not a social reality that Buddhism 'created'? Here it seems that if the defence of tradition should continue, the delicate relationship between Buddhist reality and secular social reality ought to be clarified with more compelling arguments. But I would like to point out that for the Mainland authorities, their core intention is to show that the cost of promoting modern gender equality is not necessarily the destruction of traditional views, values, and rules. By separating what is actively 'created' by religion and what is 'reflected' in religion, efforts are made to balance religiosity and progressiveness among Mainland Chinese Buddhist communities.

5. Conclusion

In traditional China, opposite views on the position of women and gender relations co-existed in normative Buddhist doctrines and

records of social practices of Buddhism. During the Republican period, under the influence of Western intellectual discourse on gender equality and 'Feminist' critique of religion, certain Chinese Buddhists started to liaise 'Feminism' and empowerment of women in the interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of non-duality and tried to revise Buddhist teaching according to a 'Feminist' agenda. Although certain eminent Buddhist authorities were not passionate about radically changing Chinese Buddhist doctrines and institutional rules related to gender, female Buddhists attempted to create a 'Feminist' version of the Buddhist tradition in China. This agenda was further deepened later in the development of Taiwanese Buddhist communities and the modernisation of Taiwanese Buddhism. Eventually, Buddhist scholars and authorities in Taiwan at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century formed a relatively unanimous view of reforming Chinese Buddhism to accommodate modern 'Feminist' discourses. This unanimous view was brought to Mainland China during the 1990s when China opened up again to the global society and Buddhism was restored as a state-sponsored religion. Since then, this view has gained its support and has been circulated online as part of the broader 'Feminist' critique of Chinese Buddhism from inside Buddhist communities and outside. However, Taiwanese Buddhist elites' reformist view and their agenda of creating a 'Feminist' Buddhism are not fully accepted by Mainland Chinese Buddhist communities and figures without any doubts. Many well-known Mainland Buddhist authorities and traditionalist Buddhists refuse to transform the long-lasting Buddhist tradition according to a modern 'Feminist' theoretical framework. Rather, to these figures, the issue of misogyny and androcentrism is irrelevant in evaluating Chinese Buddhist traditions. By deconstructing the homogeneity between the Buddhist concept of gender and the feminist interpretation of gender, traditionalist Buddhists in Mainland China try to find a different way making Buddhism legitimate in the modern Chinese society: restoring this religion as a continuous and self-consistent tradition that only neutrally reflects secular social realities rather than actively constructing them.

As the United Nations' '2030 SDG' has suggested, eradicating gender inequality in all possible aspects of human society is now a priority for global governments, organisations and communities in the upcoming decade. But from the case studies of 'Feminist' Buddhism and women empowerment in the Chinese-speaking world in this article, we may need to think about what the term 'eliminating' and 'eradicating' actually means in the context of Buddhist religion and East-Asian societies. We can see in our analysis that the way gender inequality can be dismantled does not always mean an end to or the disappearance of ostensibly gender-binary traditions. Instead, traditions are always open to new interpretations, and new meanings can be generated under the old name.

Furthermore, the so-called 'Chinese Buddhism' itself is not a consistent and holistic entity but a series of complex and historically and regionally specific phenomena. This means that what we call a Chinese Buddhist gender view may have never truly existed in history. What did happen instead is that the issue of gender and empowerment of women were never treated unanimously. Accordingly, when Zhaohui felt that female Buddhists could only attain true equality by the abolishment of 'Eight Garudhammas', while Longlian said that she felt empowered by following 'Eight Garudhammas', they might only be expressing methods and strategies in dealing with the gender that are only valid in their own socio-religious contexts. In this sense, what appears as the opposite may actually lead to the same end: that people "will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind" (United Nations 32).

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