

## **If Religion Is So Bad, Why Are Women Still In It?** — A Feminist Assessment of Buddhism at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper is based on an on-going research which is at a very preliminary stage. When Arvind Sharma contemplates at the relationship between religion and women, he notices that feminist discourse on religion often starts with the assumption of “religion oppresses women”. He thus wonders, “If religion is so bad, why are women in it?” Using the example of women participants in a contemporary Pure Land Buddhist organization in Taiwan, this paper will attempt to answer Sharma’s question. Although the group under discussion employs male symbols and androcentric texts, its women agency were still able to transform those into feminine performance and androgynous salvation. Apparently, as conflicting as gender ethics might in the group, feminine performance and androgynous salvation might explain why women take part in the religion of this group.

**Keywords:** religion and women, femininity and performance, androgynous and salvation, religious practice and women

\*I am grateful to the fieldwork assistance of Mr. Lai Jung-tang.

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# 如果宗教這麼糟，爲什麼女人還要參與？

## ——當代淨土佛教中的女性參與者

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### 摘要：

本文是以一項正在進行中的田野調查爲基礎，所作的初步研究報告。加拿大 Arvind Sharma 教授在思索宗教與女性關係的時候，注意到大部分女性主義對宗教的論述，都以「宗教壓迫婦女」的假設爲出發點，因此不禁問道：「如果宗教這麼糟，爲什麼女人還要參與？」藉由當代台灣某淨土宗佛教團體的女性參與者爲例，筆者嘗試回答 Arvind Sharma 教授的問題。結果發現，所研究的淨土團體雖然引用了如男性神聖、男性導師等陽剛符號，以及如建議「女轉男身」、女體盈弱等的男性本位經典，但其中女性媒介，卻仍有辦法將該團體的宗教實踐與儀式，轉化爲陰柔演現；且將男性本位的經典，詮釋爲中性救贖。似乎，即使該團體的性別倫理充滿矛盾之處，但因爲有陰柔演現與中性救贖，女性仍願意參與該團體的宗教。

**關鍵字：**宗教與婦女、女性特質、中性救贖、宗教實踐與婦女

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In this paper, I will use the example of women participants of a Pure Land Buddhist organization in contemporary Taiwan to discuss the relationship between religion and women. The choice of women participants in Pure Land Buddhism is not without reason. Ever since Diana Paul notices the requirement of sexual transformation in the Pure Land sutra (無量壽經),<sup>1</sup> Pure Land Buddhism has been a favorite target for feminist criticism. I remember a feminist friend reproached me, “How can you still be a Buddhist after reading this?” She especially had problem with the idea of sexual transformation: the suggestion that a woman needs to transform into a man in order to enter Pure Land. This is indeed an intriguing question, “if religion is so bad, why are women still in it?”

This is similar to Arvind Sharma’s discussion on religion and women:<sup>2</sup>

Since the relationship of religion and women these days is primarily discussed in the context of the oppression, or at least subordination, of women in the various religion, let me put this question to you point blank: were religions brought into being to oppress women? This question must be distinguished from another question: do religions oppress women? The question being raised is whether they were founded to oppress women. This leads one to the most fundamental question of all. What are religions for? More precisely, what do religions claim they are here for?<sup>3</sup>

While I acknowledge that my on-going research is far from being adequate to answer his questions, I thought that an examination on a Buddhist tradition that has been often criticized by feminists might offer some clue. In my search for the answers, I decided to conduct a fieldwork-based research on a Pure Land Buddhist organization in contemporary Taiwan. Therefore in this paper, I will discuss my findings thus far after giving a brief introduction to the organization of my research, which I will call “Snow Hut”, because of its connection to Li Bingnan (see

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<sup>1</sup> Paul, Diana Y. *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 169-171.

<sup>2</sup> Sharma, Arvind. “Toward a General Theory of Women and Religion”, pp. 167-179.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.168.

later) who bore the courtesy name, “Elder Snow Hut” 雪廬老人.

Without prior acquaintance with Snow Hut, I went into the fieldwork not knowing what to expect. But my choice of Snow Hut turned out to be quiet interesting and pointedly. First of all, as I will show later, Snow Hut is far from being a feminist group. In fact, its members were encouraged to observe the existing (patriarchal) gender norm rather than to challenge it. In exchange for the consent to conduct my fieldwork, I had to agree not only to keep the names of the organization and informants confidential but also never to publish my report in Chinese. The members explained it as “not wanting publicity”. And yet, in Snow Hut, I came to know many active, confident and strong women who were responsible for numerous important religious tasks (e.g. ritual leaders, preachers, etc.). It is in addition to that most members at Snow Hut were women. From the observation on Snow Hut activities, one would have the impression that Snow Hut was run by powerful women rather than being an organization which esteemed the traditional (patriarchal) gender norm. Perhaps precisely because of this paradox, Snow Hut is best suited to answer question: “If religion is so bad, why women are in it?”

### **Snow Hut: a case of lay Buddhism**

Snow Hut traces its lineage to two influential Pure Land thinkers of recent time, namely, monk Yinguang 印光大師(1861-1940) Li Bingnan 李炳南 (1890-1986). It seems to confirm Charles Jones’ contention that the Pure Land teachings prevailed in Taiwan today is mostly the teachings of monk Yinguang, who is commonly regarded as the thirteen patriarch of Pure Land school and one of the influential Buddhist reformers of modern time.<sup>4</sup> According to Charles Jones, Yinguang’s teachings were conveyed to Taiwanese Buddhists mainly by his lay disciple, Li Bingnan, whom the members of Snow Hut respectfully called ‘Grand Teacher Li’ (*litai laoshi*). A native of Shandong Province of mainland China, he lived and taught in Taiwan from 1949 till his death in 1986. During these nearly four decades, he lived in an ascetic lifestyle and taught Buddhism earnestly. Many of

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Charles. *Buddhism in Taiwan*, pp.115-119.

important Buddhist teachers in Taiwan of later time were his students.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, to my knowledge, Snow Hut is not the only lay Buddhist organizations in Taiwan who have strong connection with Li. Li's relation to Snow Hut is evident in the statement of one female member: "Although no one calls Grand Teacher Li a patriarch, he is surely a patriarch."<sup>6</sup>

The statement above testifies to not only the influence of Li Bingnan had on Taiwan Buddhism but also on the form of "lay Buddhism" that he exemplified. As members of Snow Hut were all laity and so were its preachers, it is fair to say that Snow Hut represents a form of lay Buddhism. According to my informants, activities at Snow Hut were carried out almost entirely by laity. The only *regular* interaction between Snow Hut and the sangha occurred only in the annual 'taking refuge in the Triple Gems' ceremony, in which the devotees would take refuge with a monk. It is important to point out that the form of lay Buddhism preached by Li differs from another form of lay Buddhism, *zhaijiao*, which was probably once the most popular form of Buddhism in Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> Not to challenge the authority of the sangha, Li simply argued that monasticism is not the only way of practicing Buddhism and laity could and should engage in diligent (Pure Land) Buddhist practices. During his nearly four decades in Taiwan, he lived in an ascetic life-style but never received monastic ordination. Rather than claiming his teachings to be enlightened messages or divine revelation, he taught a mixture of Pure Land Buddhism and Confucianism. In other words, the form of lay Buddhism taught by Li can be hardly said to be a new religion or a new sect, for he represented himself more like a scholar who preached Buddhism and Confucianism rather than a divine messenger.

Seen from this perspective, Li bears resemblance to Sri Lanka's Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933), whom, according to Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, was responsible for the formation of Protestant Buddhism in Sri Lanka. One of the main characteristics of Protestant Buddhism is the involvement of laity in Buddhism. That is, among many other things, Anagārika Dharmapāla intentionally formulated and promoted a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 122-124.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork 28 August 2007.

<sup>7</sup> For more see Charles Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, pp. 88-92.

form of Buddhism that encourages the laity to engage more actively in Buddhist practices such as meditation and not just merely taking part in rituals. He himself adopted a code of ascetic practice such as celibacy, wearing white robes and taking up the title “anagārika” in order to illustrate what a lay practitioner should do.<sup>8</sup> But Li did not go that far; at least, Li did not go as far as setting up a code of ascetic practice for lay practitioners. And unlike Anagārika Dharmapāla, Li did not promote the idea of lay celibacy. Li himself was married, although after his flight from the mainland China, he was never able to reunite with his wife and son who had remained behind. Nevertheless, Li preached lay Buddhist practice and the idea that even laity can attain liberation from *samsara* (i.e. via rebirth in Pure Land).<sup>9</sup>

Even though Snow Hut recognizes Li as its founder, in reality, however, Snow Hut is very much the work of one of Li’s close disciples. He broke away from Li’s original teaching centre, Taichung Buddhist Lotus Society 台中佛教蓮社,<sup>10</sup> shortly after the death of Li and founded Snow Hut. Today, Snow Hut is thriving. In addition to a large Buddha Hall, office, etc., the headquarter building also includes a gallery and a memorial hall devoted to Li Bingnan. Furthermore, it has a mountain retreat centre, branches in North America and Southeast Asia and affiliated Buddhist centers throughout Taiwan. Except for providing daily Buddha-name-recitation services, a common traditional Pure Land practice, Snow Hut also provides regular Buddhist sermons, retreats, youth and children’s study groups, and so on. In short, activities at Snow Hut include traditional forms of Pure Land Buddhism practice as well as modern forms of religious propagation and practice.<sup>11</sup>

In regard to gender ethics within Snow Hut, I find it both suppressing and affirming womanhood at the same time. By using the example of Snow Hut, I have managed to sum up two possible answers to Arvind Sharma’s

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<sup>8</sup> Gombrich, Richard & Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, pp.202-240.

<sup>9</sup> The website of Taichung Buddhist Lotus Society, <http://www.tcbl.org.tw>, accessed in August-September 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Official website: <http://www.tcbl.org.tw>, accessed in August- September 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Official Website of Snow Hut, accessed in August- September 2007.

questions: feminine performance and androgynous salvation.

### 1. male symbols vs. feminine performance

By “performance”, I am referring to all kinds of religious activities and practices other than textual studies. What is more difficult to define is the term “feminine”. Most feminists distinguish the terms “female” and “feminine”, in the way that “female” refers to a biological matter and “feminine” to a set of culturally constructed characteristics that are usually associated with female.<sup>12</sup> I am aware that by using the term “feminine”, I run the risk of falling into essentialist pitfall. However, Snow Hut is far from being a feminist group. In fact, according to my informants, “caring for one’s family and fulfilling one’s duties” 敦倫盡份 is the basic moral guideline in Snow Hut. That is, Snow Hut urges men to do works culturally associated with men and women works culturally associated with women. Since female members of Snow Hut outnumber that of male, religious performances at Snow Hut tend to be numerically dominated by women. As such, the term “feminine performance” is to draw attention to women’s involvement with religious performance and to highlight the participation of women at Snow Heart.

This idea of women agency in religious performance was first brought to me by Barbara Andaya:

In thinking across the Asian region in premodern times, I would therefore like to suggest that women, like other audiences, exercised some agency in shaping the manner in which religious messages were conveyed even as they appear to be transformed into passive vessels for teaching and direction under male authority.<sup>13</sup>

She argues that women agency might be involved in religious performance in four different ways: one might be the listening audience such as being present at a sermon, the participating audience such as singing out a

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<sup>12</sup> Toril Moi, “Feminist, Female, Feminine”.

<sup>13</sup> Andaya, Barbra. “Participating Audiences”.

text, the giving audience such as giving alms, or the mobile audience such as going on a pilgrimage. Either way, women's involvement in religious performance enables a transformative relationship between women agency and religious messages.<sup>14</sup> She points out that, for example, women's involvement in Theravāda rituals might be one of the key elements that contributed to the success of Theravāda Buddhism in early Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I will start my discussion on the findings from Snow Hut's religious performance.

At first glance, Snow Hut appeared to be a typical androcentric, if not patriarchal, organization dominated by male symbols. Its leader, whom the members referred to as 'Head Teacher' (*daoshi*), was male and wielded great influence on the organization. As one member told me, "Head Teacher often told us not to speak our mind but to quote the teachings of patriarchs and Grand Teacher Li ...because if they had said so, it must mean that they had been to that [spiritual] state",<sup>16</sup> the religious figures whom members of Snow Hut idealized were mainly male. Male symbols were also manifested in other ways. For example, Li Bingnan's calligraphy and photos were exhibited throughout the headquarter building. Being a Pure Land organization, its main religious symbol is the male Amitābha Buddha.

However, underneath those male symbols, women agency was able to maneuver and negotiate with religious performances. To begin with, Snow Hut widened women's social network. Like most religious communities, female members of Snow Hut greatly outnumbered that of male members. For instance, in one of the daily Buddha-name-recitation service (*nian fo*) that I observed, a middle-age laywoman *led* the service while most participants were old women. Women were obviously included in this religious performance.

Feminine performance at Snow Hut could also be seen in other places. For example, one informant told me that most of the participants in activities of Snow Hut were female. During the few visits I have had to Snow Hut, I also noticed that there were always more women than men. Women might be

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Andaya, Barbara Watson. "Localising the Universal".

<sup>16</sup> Fieldwork note 28/08/2007.



engaged in religious services such as Buddha-name-recitation service (*nian fo*), or volunteering to work in the office, or tasks traditionally assigned to women such as cooking and cleaning. Critics might point out that the women's doing domestic chores (e.g. cooking and cleaning) is a sign of women's subjugation to patriarchal arrangement that had assigned those chores to women in the first place. Yet, women leaving the domestic sphere and going into a public religious sphere is itself worthy of notice. Working or being in a religious community such as volunteering to cook at Buddhist temples has been shown to provide good opportunities for women to bond with one and another and to enjoy a kind of sisterhood/ social life that is not otherwise available at home.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the provision of social freedom to women by Buddhism is nothing new in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Male writers of late Imperial China had complained about women's involvement with Buddhism, for Buddhist affairs might take women away from domesticity as prescribed in Confucianism.<sup>18</sup> Like those before them, Snow Hut provided women with the opportunities to temporarily leave behind the confinement of home and to enter the public religious sphere where women can seek alternative meanings for themselves other than being confined to the roles of wives and mothers.

In fact, when I talked to women who often provided the catering service to Snow Hut events (e.g. youth camp, adult study group, etc.), they exhibited joy and self-assertion in regard to those tasks. One said, "Today's society is full of problems. When we look around, we see young people who behaving badly. So my heart is full of joy whenever I see young people taking classes at Snow Hut. I am very happy to cook for the youth camp, etc. I feel that I am doing something good for the society".<sup>19</sup> Far from seeing her cooking task as servicing religious leaders, she saw her cooking task as a positive social contribution.

But women at Snow Hut were not limited to do tasks traditionally associated with women. Among the office employees and preachers of Snow Hut, many were women. Even though different informants told me different

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<sup>17</sup> Li, Yu-chen. "Jiemeiqing in the Monastic Kitchen in Post-War Taiwan".

<sup>18</sup> Zhou Yinqun. "The Hearth and the Temple".

<sup>19</sup> Fieldwork note 13/10/2007.

ratios of the sexes of the employees and preachers, it is still certain that women at Snow Hut were involved at the managerial and preaching levels. The fact that there were female preachers at Snow Hut is especially significant. Elaine Lawless' research on rural Pentecostal churches in Indiana and Missouri reveals that the very presence of women preachers transforms religious subject simply because women's voices are brought into it.<sup>20</sup> The same can be said about women preachers at Snow Hut.

Another issue concerns the masculinization of Taiwanese Buddhist women.<sup>21</sup> To my knowledge, this issue seems to concern with women in sangha only. The masculinization of Buddhist women might have its root (though not exclusively) in the concept of thirty-two physical characteristics of Buddhahood that include a male physical characteristic.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Hillary Crane notices the phenomenon of masculinization of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns, in the way that Taiwanese Buddhist nuns are taught to behave like "great heroes" (*da zhang fu*), to address each other in masculine terms (e.g. "Dharma brother", *shixiong*) ... in short, to renounce anything feminine.<sup>23</sup> But Snow Hut is a lay Buddhist organization. As far as I can tell, patterns of masculinization of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns as observed by Crane did not exist in Snow Hut. To begin with, members of Snow Hut did not claim the attainment of Buddhahood as their ultimate goal for religious practice. Instead, they claimed to want to be reborn in Pure Land where they can continue their religious practice until they attain Buddhahood. As such, the issue of the thirty-two physical characteristics and Buddhahood was not an immediate concern for its members. At Snow Hut, women addressed each other by feminine titles such as "Dharma aunt" (*shi gu*) for older women, or in sexually-neutral term such as "teacher" (*lao shi*) for both female and male preachers. And there was no dress code that required women to renounce their feminine appearance. I have met female members who looked

<sup>20</sup> Lawless, Elaine J. "Transforming the Master Narrative".

<sup>21</sup> One must be cautious not to say that *Buddhism* masculinizes women, because my previous research has found that instead of masculinization, Buddhism in Sri Lanka femininizes women. Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, pp.189-190.

<sup>22</sup> Gross, Rita M. *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>23</sup> Crane, Hillary. *Men in Spirit*.

masculine as well as female members who dressed in a very feminine way. Femininity seems to have been preserved at Snow Hut.

Perhaps more significantly is the issue of blood pollution. It has been claimed that “notions of female pollution are deeply embedded in Taiwanese Buddhist discourse”.<sup>24</sup> However, this claim is not consistent with my previous research which finds that the blood taboo, though exists, is not universal in Taiwanese Buddhist discourse.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the blood taboo did not seem to exist in Snow Hut. My informants at Snow Hut denied the observation of blood taboo at their organization. They asserted me that they observed no blood taboo in their activities. Menstruating women may join any religious service like everyone else. If,

In Taiwan, notions of female pollution reveal a struggle for status, for taboos relating to the female body and sexuality are used to sustain male hegemony. Especially in the religious sphere, arguments of the polluted and polluting female restrict women religious practice severely, suppressing their femininity while simultaneously elevating masculinity, and thus exalting the religious and spiritual status of men[,]<sup>26</sup>

then the lack of blood taboo in Snow Hut implies the inclusion of women.

Overall, femininity seems to be preserved at Snow Hut. It might have employed overwhelming number of male symbols, but at the same time, women agency was able to secure femininity through various kinds of performance. This, of course, does not necessarily follow the subversion of traditional/patriarchal gender arrangement. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, the slogan, “caring for one’s family and fulfilling one’s duties” 敦倫盡份, was the basic moral guideline promoted by Snow Hut. Therefore, rather than subverting the traditional/patriarchal gender arrangement, Snow Hut upheld it. Yet, through various kinds of feminine performance, Snow Hut created a religious context that involves women.

Having said this, it is perhaps important to add that women’s relatively

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<sup>24</sup> P.158, Lhamo, Yeshe Choekyi & Cassia, Paul Sant Cassia. “The Fangs of Reproduction”.

<sup>25</sup> Cheng, Wei-Yi. *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka*, pp.66-67.

<sup>26</sup> P.157, Lhamo, Yeshe Choekyi & Cassia, Paul Sant Cassia. “The Fangs of Reproduction”.

high status in a new religion movement or new religious order is not unknown. For example, women are said to enjoy high status in new religions in Japan.<sup>27</sup> George Bond's study on contemporary lay meditation movements in Sri Lanka also reveals that women tend to enjoy greater power in lay Buddhist meditation movements than in traditional monastic setting.<sup>28</sup> Even in religious performances that severely suppress women, it has been found that women are able to develop and express gender resistance and self-assertion.<sup>29</sup> Seen from this comparative perspective, feminine performance at Snow Hut is not unusual. Nevertheless, the existence of feminine performance at Snow Hut still suggests that women are in religion, because religious performance involves them.

## 2. androcentric texts vs. androgynous salvation

In addition to the provision of feminine performance at Snow Hut, another factor that might have attracted women to be in the religion of Snow Hut is its androgynous salvation.

Similar to its religious performance, salvation in the religion of Snow Hut also appears to be androcentric at first glance. The question regarding women's salvation in Pure Land Buddhism was noticed fairly early on by Diana Paul. Quoting Max Müller's translation of Sanskrit version of the *Pure Land Sutra (Sukhāvativyūha)*, she notices the implication of the "necessity of a male nature":<sup>30</sup>

"O Bhagavan [lord], if, after I have obtained Bodhi [enlightenment], women in immeasurable, innumerable, inconceivable, incomparable, immense Buddha countries on all sides, after having heard my name, should allow carelessness to arise, should not turn their thoughts toward Bodhi, should, when they are free from birth, not despise their female nature; and if they, being born again should assume a second female nature, then may I not obtain the highest perfect

<sup>27</sup> Martinez, D.P. "Japanese Religions".

<sup>28</sup> Bond, George D. "The contemporary Lay Meditation Movement and Lay Gurus in Sri Lanka".

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Hegland, Mary Elain. "Flagellation and Fundamentalism".

<sup>30</sup> Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, p. 170.

knowledge.”<sup>31</sup>

The passage above clearly implies that there is no woman in the Pure Land because women would not “assume a second female nature”.

The problem is that the sutra concerned appears in many different versions. Even among its Chinese translation, several versions exist.<sup>32</sup> I find the translation by Inagaki Hisao and Harold Stewart closer to the version used by Snow Hut.<sup>33</sup>

If, when I attain Buddhahood, women in the immeasurable and inconceivable Buddha lands of the ten directions who, having heard my Name, rejoice in faith, awaken aspiration for enlightenment, and wish to renounce womanhood should after death be reborn again as women, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike the first version, the second version suggests that women may renounce womanhood only when they “wish to”.

The passage concerned is one of the vows made by *bhikṣu* Dharmākara in creating Pure Land. This vow of *bhikṣu* Dharmakara (“the 35<sup>th</sup> vow” henceforth) has been studied extensively by Paul Harrison.<sup>35</sup> After comparing different versions of the vow (including Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan versions), he finds that not all versions are consistent with one and other. While the version used by Snow Hut does not attribute the renunciation of womanhood as the necessary condition for rebirth in Pure Land, some other Chinese versions<sup>36</sup> do.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Harrison finds that Buddhists’ belief about female rebirth in Pure Land is not consistent with sutra messages either!<sup>38</sup> I, too, find a discrepancy between textual messages

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, pp.169-170.

<sup>32</sup> Huntington, John C. “Rebirth in Amitābha’s Sukhāvātī”.

<sup>33</sup> T 360.

<sup>34</sup> Hisao, Inagaki (trans.), in collaboration with Harold Stewart, *The Three pure Land Sutras*, p.18. 設我得佛，十方無量不可思議諸佛世界，其有女人，聞我名字，歡喜信樂，發菩提心，厭惡女身，壽終之後，復為女像者，不取正覺。

<sup>35</sup> Harrison, Paul. “Women in the Pure Land”.

<sup>36</sup> T.361 and T. 362.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Harrison, “Women in the Pure Land”, p. 563.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.553.

and the belief of members of Snow Hut.

Some informants claimed that the 35<sup>th</sup> vow was not discussed at their meetings or sermons. One female preacher claimed, “The focus is not on womanhood but on whether one has the opportunity to hear Dharma,”<sup>39</sup> quite effectively changing the subject from androcentric to androgynous. Usually, when inquired about the 35<sup>th</sup> vow, the members would go on to stress that Pure Land is a wondrous place where everyone is lotus-born, embodying with the physical characteristics of “great hero” (*da zhang fu*; i.e. the thirty-two marks), and therefore, beings in Pure Land are asexual. It does not seem to have occurred to them that there is a conflict between having the physical characteristics of “great hero” and being asexual. Nor were the members bothered by the mention of the renunciation of womanhood, rather than *manhood*, in the 35<sup>th</sup> vow. Their emphasis was always on “lotus-born” and “asexual”. Apparently, although Pure Land texts contain androcentric messages, the members’ interpretation of the scriptures on the subject of salvation is androgynous: everyone can gain rebirth in Pure Land where everyone is lotus-born and asexual.

Having said this, it is equally significant to note that not all members of Snow Hut were aware of the 35<sup>th</sup> vow. Textualism may assume that every religious person is familiar with the content of their religious texts, and therefore, the 35<sup>th</sup> vow would have equally-affecting impact on the members’ gender ethics. My fieldwork at Snow Hut suggests otherwise. Female preachers and the majority of office clerks (i.e. better-educated) were aware of the 35<sup>th</sup> vow, but the situation changed when the demography moved upward to the older women and to the more rural area. Most older and rural women (i.e. less-educated) I talked to were unaware of the 35<sup>th</sup> vow. They might devotee a great deal of time to religious activities such as Buddha-name-recitation, hospice service 助念 and cooking for Snow Hut events, but they tended not to read scriptures. Their religious understanding usually came from their interactions with other members, attending Snow Hut sermons and watching Pure Land monks’ T.V. sermons. They rejected the suggestion that women cannot be reborn in Pure Land, and, like other members of different social strata, stressed that beings in Pure Land were

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<sup>39</sup> Fieldwork note 23/9/2007.

lotus-born and asexual. This finding implies that women's relationship with religion cannot be understood solely on the basis of textual discourse. The channel or methods through which women acquire religious understanding is equally important.

Another element that might have contributed to the members' belief in androgynous salvation is an important genre that has existed in Pure Land tradition for centuries: the records of rebirths in Pure Land (*wangsheng juan*). Those "records" are supposed to contain "true stories" of Pure Land practitioners who successfully gain rebirth in Pure Land. Lai's study on the *wangsheng juan* shows that pre-modern records were written on the basis of a hierarchy that places monks and men above the laity and women:<sup>40</sup>

Numbers of stories in various records:

	Ching-t'u lun (675?)	Jui-yin-chuan (900?)	Sui-yüan-wang-sheng-chi (1050)	Li-chiao-chi (1269)	Wang-sheng-chi (1584)	Sheng-hsien-chuan (1783)
Monks	6	21	60	134	98	272
Nuns	4	5	20	7	5	11
Nobles				31	32	35
Commoners	5	8	15	22	28	71
Women	5	6	6	45	32	79
Evil Men				3	5	
Animals				4	4	
Others		1 king 1 queen 2 novices 2 children				1 king
	T'ang			Sung	Ming	Ch'ing <sup>41</sup>

Snow Hut published records of rebirth in Pure Land, too, but the hierarchy in the pre-modern records is not seen in Snow Hut publications, probably because it was a lay organization and contemporary Taiwan does not have monarchy. The (female) editor of three such records told me: "The record is to be evidence of the fruit of practicing Pure Land Buddhism, to

<sup>40</sup> Lai, Whalen. "Legends of Births and the Pure Land Tradition in China".

<sup>41</sup> Cited from *ibid.*, p. 188.

prove to intellectuals that practicing Buddha-name-recitation (*nian fo*) does bring rebirth in Pure Land".<sup>42</sup> Hence, the records of rebirth in Pure Land can reveal the members' belief on salvation.

One record published in 2006 is neatly color-printed with photos of the deceased and the deceased's relics. Out of the 107 records, 66 or 61.68% were women. Most of them had only elementary level of education and the average age of death was 78. All of them were associated with Snow Hut one way or another, and all of them left behind colorful relics after cremation. The members explained to me that the colorful relics were signs of the deceased's successful rebirth in Pure Land. In order to raise faith in Pure Land Buddhism in people, those colorful relics were carefully placed in stupa-like, transparent urns and displayed in a specially dedicated room for visitors to admire. Some of the stories in the 2006 record described people who had dedicated their life to Pure Land practice, while some others had practiced Pure Land Buddhism only shortly before death. The message is clear: so as long one practices Buddha-name-recitation (*nian-fo*) wholeheartedly and earnestly, regardless of sex, education, length of practice, etc., one can surely gain rebirth in Pure Land. Since one's sex is irrelevant to whether one can be reborn in Pure Land, the expressed belief on salvation in the record of rebirth is androgynous.

Some members were clearly aware of the existence of negative portrayals of womanhood in some texts. Their interpretation of those textual passages range from stressing that women's body being weaker was regarded as a biological fact in ancient India, moreover, *contemporary Taiwanese* do not treat women and men equally; therefore the passages merely reflect what was regarded as social reality. One particular interesting interpretation was from a male member. He reasoned those negative textual portrayals of womanhood to be a device of deterring men from sexual misconduct: since women's sexual desire is much lower than men, there is no need for negative portrayal of manhood.<sup>43</sup> I find it interesting, because for decades, (Buddhist) feminists have often focused their attention on

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<sup>42</sup> Fieldwork note 1/9/2007.

<sup>43</sup> Fieldwork note 1/9/2007.



textual passages that portray women as temptresses.<sup>44</sup> And here was this non-feminist Buddhist claiming that it was men rather than women who were sexual aggressor. Although I have not yet been able to verify how prevalent this view is in Snow Hut, it is likely that not all Buddhist cultures share this view. For example, Hiroko Kawanami finds that in Myanmar, popular Buddhist texts and widespread, popular beliefs project women, rather than men, as sexually uncontrollable and undisciplined, so much so that women's ability to uphold celibacy (i.e. nunhood) is doubtful.<sup>45</sup> And the Pāli Jataka is full of stories of sexually-wild women who cannot control their sexual desire.<sup>46</sup> The discrepancy between my informant's belief and findings in other Buddhist cultures perhaps attests to feminist agitation that women's sexuality is socially and culturally constructed rather than biologically inherent.

Even for female members who accepted negative textual portrayals of womanhood as reflection of biological and social reality, they were able to turn those negative portrayals into an empowering message. They contended that, precisely because women have to endure more suffering, they had to devote themselves even more diligently to Pure Land practice. All of them were able to tell me their personal "miracle" experiences (*gan ying*), which they saw as rewards of Pure Land practice. In other words, women members displayed self-assertion about their religious capacity (i.e. the accumulated progress towards liberation) as well as confidence in their ultimate salvation.

Taken as a whole, even though we can find Pure Land texts suggesting the inferiority of women, Snow Hut members' idea of ultimate salvation is androgynous. Perhaps it is this idea of androgynous salvation that attracted women to Pure Land Buddhism.

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<sup>44</sup> For example, see Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 3-50.

<sup>45</sup> Kawanami, Hiroko. "Can Women Be Celibate? Sexuality and abstinence in Theravada Buddhism".

<sup>46</sup> See stories cited in Harischandra, V.V. J. *Psychiatric Aspects of Jataka Stories*.

## Conclusion

By the end of her research, Lawless argues that feminists have not paid enough attention to how women are changing religion.<sup>47</sup> However, I would not go as far as to say that “women *are changing* religion”, because it has been pointed out that so long religious symbols remain male and textual messages androcentric, once the new egalitarian religious movement becomes institutionalized, women would be subsequently allocated to serve men who represent the idealized religious figures.<sup>48</sup> Snow Hut is a relatively new religious order, so it is too early to say whether women participants *are changing* Pure Land Buddhism.

But my contention is similar to that of Barbara Andaya, Amy Hollywood<sup>49</sup> and others, that in order to understand the relationship between women and religion, more attention should be paid to religious practice and ritual. By using the example of women participants in a contemporary Pure Land Buddhist organization, it appears that regardless of male symbols and androcentric texts, women still have good reasons to participate in religion; namely, the ability to turn religious practice and ritual into feminine performance and religious belief into androgynous salvation.

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<sup>47</sup> Lawless, Elaine J. “Transforming the Master Narrative”, p.75.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Woman-Church*, New York: Harper and Row (1985).

<sup>49</sup> Andaya, Barbra. “Participating Audiences”. Hollywood, Amy. “Practice, Belief and Feminist Philosophy of Religion”.

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