

## Article

# When Mahāyāna Meets Theravāda: The Position of Chinese *Bhikṣuṇīs* in Contemporary Myanmar

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**Abstract:** Mahāyāna and Theravāda are the two major traditions of Buddhism in contemporary Asia. Although they share many similar teachings, there are long-standing disputes between their respective sets of adherents, touching on doctrine, ritual, religious practices, and the ultimate goal, among other matters. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Yangon and Mandalay, this study explores gender's role in the position of Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* in the sociocultural context of Theravāda-majority Myanmar, where the full *bhikṣuṇī* lineage of Theravāda Buddhism has died out. Its findings, firstly, shed light on how the local Theravāda ethos inevitably affects Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna nuns' positions and experiences of religious- and ethnic-minority status. Secondly, they demonstrate the gender dynamics of Sino-Burmese nuns' interactions both with indigenous Burmese monks and Myanmar's ethnic-Chinese laity. As such, this research opens up a fresh perspective on these nuns' monastic lives, to which scant scholarly attention has hitherto been paid. Specifically, it argues that while Sino-Burmese nuns are subjected to "double suffering" on both gender and ethnoreligious minority grounds, they play an important role in shaping the future of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism by educating the next generation of monastics and serving the religious needs of the wider Sino-Burmese community in Myanmar.



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**Keywords:** contemporary Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism; Buddhist nuns; gender; Myanmar; Burma; religious minority; *bhikṣuṇīs*' identities; overseas Chinese laity; Sino-Burmese monastics; contemporary Theravāda Buddhism

## 1. Introduction

The history of the world has largely been written through men's eyes, such that we effectively have a male version of events (Sarao 2004, p. 1), and this is no less true of the history of women's religious experience (Knott 1995, p. 199). A connected problem is what Rita Gross (2005, p. 18) has called "inadequate and unbalanced" research on women and religion due to androcentrism in academia. Though this problem has diminished since Gross wrote, the accomplishments of female Buddhist monastics are still often ignored by Western scholars, who have typically been more interested in the Buddha's hesitation about establishing the nuns' order than in the nuns' achievements (Gross 1993, p. 30). Because of the increasingly important roles played by women in political, economic, and social life over the past century, the subject of women has assumed greater importance for various faiths, particularly in the West. I. B. Horner's classic 1930 book *Women under Primitive Buddhism* alerted a wide audience to issues around women in Buddhism. Since then, increasing numbers of feminists and other scholars have researched and questioned the positions of nuns and other women in Buddhist texts. For example, there is an ongoing, heated debate about the re-establishment of *bhiksuni* ordination in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions,<sup>1</sup> involving not only the various schools of Buddhism but also academics, particularly with regard to the complex issues around the rules in the *Vinaya* (Buddhist disciplinary texts) and

the legitimacy (or not) of ordination. Various studies, including many based on empirical fieldwork, have explored non-fully ordained contemporary Buddhist nuns' experiences and perceptions of the controversy surrounding this ordination movement. Such nuns are known as *maechi*<sup>2</sup> in Thailand, as *thilā-shin*<sup>3</sup> in Myanmar, and as eight/ten-precept nuns in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 1994; Cheng 2007; Falk 2007; Carbonnel 2009; Seeger 2009; Kawanami 2013; Salgado 2013). Their status within the religious system is at best ambiguous, and at worst, fully subordinates them to monks, as performers of menial services for them. Nevertheless, the voices of these and other Southeast Asian Buddhist women are gradually being heard and understood, and particularly so in the context of the debate on the validity and (re-)establishment of full ordination for nuns in Theravāda tradition, where the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage has died out. In short, ethnographic research on Theravāda Buddhist women in Thailand, Myanmar, and/or Sri Lanka, has been extensive and of a high quality.

However, various religious minority communities in mainland Southeast Asia are generally ignored, not only by the local majority religions but also by academics. As Jack Meng-Tat Chia (2020, p. 8) recently pointed out, the root of this problem is that scholars tend to narrowly identify the category of “Southeast Asian Buddhism” as Theravāda Buddhism. Therefore, McDaniel (2010); Hansen (2014) and Chia (2020) advocated looking beyond the Theravāda tradition when studying Southeast Asian Buddhism. By focusing on Mahāyāna *bhikṣunis* in contemporary Myanmar<sup>4</sup> who are Sino-Burmese, i.e., people of Chinese descent who identify with Burma,<sup>5</sup> this paper not only answers that call but extends this academic conversation to deeper questions about the nature of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism at its margins, considered specifically as a local minority immigrant religion in a Theravāda-majority society and culture.

The Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism of Myanmar is regarded as an immigrant religion, having been brought there from Mainland China in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. In general, wherever there are Chinese people, the sacred footprint of Buddhism can be discerned (Lai et al. 2008, p. 96). As noted by Meei-Hwa Chern (2009, p. 61),<sup>6</sup> monastics have played a critical role in the history of cultural interaction between China and Southeast Asia; wherever Chinese monks go to live, monasteries or temples are likely to be established, and these sites then serve as magnets for groups of Chinese immigrants.<sup>7</sup> Overseas Chinese, monastics and laity alike, have played key roles in the spread of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism into various Southeast Asian countries, as well as in this religious tradition's further development there (e.g., Tan 2011; Ashiwa and Wank 2005; Chern 2009; Hue 2013; Dean 2018; Chia 2020). On the one hand, this spread of Buddhism to new places resonates strongly with Jan Nattier's (1997, p. 78) category of “Baggage Buddhism”, which is “deliberately monoethnic in membership at the outset” because it operates not only for religious purposes but also as a community's support network. On the other hand, the transplantation of Mahāyāna Buddhism into Theravāda countries via immigration or commerce has inevitably resulted in unprecedented cross-traditional communication, conflicts, adaptation, and/or integration. Given the marked differences between these two Buddhist traditions in terms of both ritual and the religious practices of monastics, it is especially worth examining overseas Chinese nuns' religious and minority experiences of living in the sociocultural context of Theravāda-majority Myanmar.

While the issue of Mahāyāna–Theravāda border-crossing is a topic of strong interest in Buddhist Studies, only a limited amount of ethnographic work on Chinese Buddhism in regions of the world beyond the traditional East Asian Mahāyāna territories has been conducted.<sup>8</sup> Research engagement with Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Myanmar has been especially scant, in part as a result of that country's *isolationism* up until 2010. When it opened its doors to the outside world after five decades of army-imposed hibernation, a major window of opportunity opened for scholars to empirically investigate its Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist community. Some of the ensuing research has sketched the outlines of how Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism changed within and became integrated into the Theravāda contexts of Burmese society before the military coup that established Myanmar's

current regime in 2021. These include a case study of Chinese Buddhism in Myanmar by Feng-Yng Wu (2006), a Buddhist nun from Taiwan who has researched the historical development and difficulties of Chinese Buddhist monasteries in Yangon; an exploration of the past and present interdependence of Chinese Buddhism and the Myanmar Chinese, by Bingxian Chen and Shuai Feng (Chen and Feng 2016, pp. 57–62); and an examination of how Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism affect the Sino-Burmese's laity religious life and ethnic identity in Mandalay via different degrees of localisation and acculturation, by Ying Duan (2015, pp. 43–71). However, the above-cited studies' treatment of Buddhist religious life leaves much to be desired: in some cases, only relying on out-of-date sources for Sino-Burmese monks' experiences or presenting general views of ritual and religious practices. Moreover, none of these works can be said to constitute theoretically informed explorations of the contextual factors affecting Sino-Burmese monastics' experience and adaptation to local customs. In short, there has not hitherto been any sustained enquiry into how contemporary Chinese Buddhists in Myanmar, considered an ethnoreligious group, have understood and enacted localisation.

In focusing on Buddhist women, it is important not to allow the pendulum to swing too far and overlook first-generation Chinese monks' contribution to spreading and developing Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Theravāda contexts. Most Chinese Mahāyāna monks in Burma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged in short-term activities such as visits to holy sites, rather than seeking to propagate Buddhism, and their historical footprint was therefore small.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon was, and remains, a place of pilgrimage for many Chinese monastics. Chinese Buddhist monasteries were thus built for the temporary accommodation of a growing number of Chinese pilgrim monks near Shwedagon. Despite their limited character, the existence of these dedicated spaces for Chinese practitioners enabled the spread of the Mahāyāna tradition in Burma (Wu 2006, pp. 16–18).

Feng-Yng Wu (2006, pp. 16–17) compiled a list of the Chinese monastics who came to Burma during the Qing Dynasty and early republican period, together with their reasons for doing so. The majority of these individuals who made pilgrimages from China to Shwedagon Pagoda or did religious business in Myanmar were monks rather than nuns. Given that most Buddhist monasteries in Yangon were built by first-generation monks in the early twentieth century, it is somewhat surprising that the individuals currently managing Buddhist institutions in Yangon and other areas of Myanmar include some second- and third-generation Sino-Burmese nuns (ibid., pp. 50–51). Some nuns took over the monasteries from their male masters after the latter's deaths (e.g., at Luohan Si and Zangjing Lou), whereas some others established nunneries on their own initiative (e.g., at Zhonghua Si and Miaoyin Si). This could be connected to the fact that, according to my fieldwork observations, Sino-Burmese nuns in contemporary Myanmar outnumber Sino-Burmese monks by five to one (ca. 100 vs. ca. 20).<sup>10</sup> One of the most prominent of these nuns, Ven. Hongxing (who will be further discussed below), was sent from Myanmar to Taiwan for advanced monastic education, and some talented young nuns who are motivated to stay in monastic circles have followed suit. Of these, some returned to Myanmar, aiming to foster the future growth of the Sino-Burmese monastic community and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism more generally there.

While the Mahāyāna tradition has minority status in Myanmar, Sino-Burmese nuns' sheer numbers, as well as their educational standards, have risen in recent decades in a way that resonates with Taiwanese nuns' circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, junior Sino-Burmese nuns are often sent to Taiwan for advanced education. Yet, despite these connections and similarities, and the fact that the Buddhist nuns of Taiwan have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, Sino-Burmese nuns' religious positions and experiences in contemporary Myanmar have hitherto been largely unexplored. Therefore, Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* have been selected as the main research subjects of this study, which will attempt to capture *bhikṣuṇīs*' attitudes and approaches toward their settlement in the

host country and to understand how these relate to their monastic identities and social recognition.

This study addresses two main research questions:

1. How does the local ethos affect Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna nuns' positions and experiences as religious minority members in a Theravāda host country with no recent history of a *bhikṣuṇī* lineage? Specifically, are they recognised as *bhikṣuṇīs*, or merely as eight-precept nuns in the eyes of the local monastics and laity?
2. What are contemporary Sino-Burmese nuns' general perceptions of, and practices involving, their gender relationship both with indigenous Burmese monks and Myanmar's ethnic-Chinese laity? Specifically, are the eight *gurudharma* rules<sup>12</sup> reinforced when Mahāyāna nuns interact with male Theravāda colleagues (e.g., to bow or not to bow)? And what are Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs*' roles in overseas Chinese communities?

When studying Chinese Buddhism or any other Chinese religion, applying a combination of historical, textual, and fieldwork approaches can be very rewarding. As Daniel Overmyer (1998, p. 4) has pointed out, “knowledge of history and texts can enrich field observation, and field observation can often provide a sense of context for past practices”. Following Overmyer's recommendations, I adopted interviews and observation as my key qualitative methods, supplemented by analyses of historical writings utilised by Sino-Burmese nuns and monks in Yangon and Mandalay.

While *bhikṣuṇīs* of all status levels were this study's primary interviewees, the viewpoints on Buddhist nuns held by the Sino-Burmese laity were also collected via interviews and informal conversation, for the sake of comparison and to gain as complete a picture as possible of the current situation. A total of twelve face-to-face interviews were conducted in eleven Chinese Buddhist institutions in Myanmar.<sup>13</sup> One formal interview with a senior Hokkien Sino-Burmese layman and several informal conversations with ritual participants were also recorded as corroboration of the monastics' perspectives.

Theravāda Buddhism is the predominant religion in Myanmar, where there are around 500,000 monks and 75,000 nuns.<sup>14</sup> The percentage of lay Theravāda Buddhists among the national population is likewise quite high, at around 88%, according to the U.S. State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom Report.<sup>15</sup> It is also a religious landscape in which Burmese laypeople have traditionally spent fairly large proportions of their incomes on Buddhist donations (Sakya 2011, p. 140). In Myanmar, Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism is clearly a minority religion, but it nevertheless has given rise to a rich monastic scene. Indeed, it would be very difficult, or perhaps impossible, to conduct fieldwork in all the Chinese monastic institutions there. Therefore, I selected Yangon and Mandalay as my major sites for fieldwork-data collection, not only because the majority of the ethnic-Chinese populations in these cities are descendants of early overseas Chinese migrants from Fujian, Guangdong<sup>16</sup> or Yunnan,<sup>17</sup> but also because many Chinese Buddhist temples were built to meet the needs of first-generation Chinese immigrants there; anyone researching Chinese Buddhism in Myanmar can obtain a major ‘head start’ by focusing on those two cities initially. As such, the present work can be best described as a multiple-case study. Widening one's range of fieldwork sites is more likely to yield a balanced overview of one's subject matter and can allow comparisons of nuanced differences among them. Nevertheless, Stake (2005, p. 451) noted that the sample size in a multiple-case study is usually “much too small to warrant random selection”. I therefore selected my target Chinese monasteries purposively to provide the requisite variety and balanced overview, and perhaps more importantly in light of my research, focus on nuanced, localised differences in religious practices. Thus, a total of seven monasteries in Yangon and four in Mandalay were chosen, as shown in Table 1. Most of the fieldwork data were collected in 2018 and 2019, i.e., before the military coup that established Myanmar's current regime.



**Table 1.** Interview sites, by region.

Yangon	Mandalay
Shifang Guanyin Si 十方觀音寺 (one interviewee)	Jingming Chan Si 淨明禪寺 (one interviewee)
Zangjing Lou 藏經樓 (one interviewee)	Dongmiu Guanyin Si 洞繆觀音寺 (one interviewee)
Daben Chan Si 達本禪寺 (one interviewee)	Yunnan Huiguan 雲南會館 (one interviewee)
Luohan Si 羅漢寺 (one interviewee)	Jinduoyan 金多堰 (one interviewee)
Zhonghua Si 中華寺 (one interviewee)	
Miaoyin Si 妙音寺 (one interviewee)	
Mahā Kusālā Yāma International Meditation Centre 靈鷲山緬甸法成就寺國際禪修中心 (two interviewees)	

Thematic analysis was applied to nuns' interview responses and to their independently expressed views on their religious lives in present-day Myanmar. This approach, which has been widely used with qualitative data, is “for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79), and can be summed up as emphasising “what is said rather than [ . . . ] how it is said” (Bryman 2008, p. 553). I have followed the process of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

In particular, in light of my research questions and aims, I have categorised these fieldwork data into three distinct dimensions: (1) status, i.e., whether a person is recognised as a *bhikṣuṇī* or not; (2) interactions and relationships among Burmese monks, Sino-Burmese monks, and Sino-Burmese nuns; and (3) the role of Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* in the overseas Chinese community. Each of these three dimensions is explored in detail in its own section below.

## 2. Being Recognised as *Bhikṣuṇīs* or Not

Before proceeding to my fieldwork results, it will be helpful to the reader to have some brief background on female monastics in Myanmar. Around two and half millennia ago, the order of nuns was established when the Buddha allowed women to join the Buddhist monastic community. Nevertheless, most nuns in various Buddhist traditions have never received the same rights as their male counterparts, and down the ages, nunneries have been more vulnerable than monks' communities to political and economic problems. As a result, with the exception of the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, which is still active in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, all traditions for *bhikṣuṇīs*' lineages have become extinct, including the *Pāli* tradition in Southeast Asia and the *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya* tradition in Tibet.<sup>18</sup> *Thilā-shin* in Myanmar, like Thai *maechis*, live in nunneries according to the precepts of a novice nun, shaving their heads and wearing pink robes; but they are not ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs*, leaving their status quite ambiguous:

On the one hand, Buddhist nuns in Myanmar endorse one of the typical traits of monastic living in the Theravāda tradition: they live on the gifts and alms they receive from lay people<sup>19</sup> [ . . . ]. On the other hand, nuns in Myanmar appear closer to laywomen when their relationship with monks in their role as donor [for merit-making] is considered. (Carbonnel 2009, p. 267)

Crucially, many Burmese nuns have appeared to be formally subordinated to monks, performing whatever daily chores and other menial services they require (Kawanami 1990). Therefore, it is worth investigating whether Sino-Burmese Buddhist nuns in contemporary Myanmar have gained social recognition and respect for their status as *bhikṣuṇīs*, despite having been ordained in an essentially foreign tradition of *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*.<sup>20</sup>

My fieldwork data suggest that, owing to more mutual interactions among Buddhists in Taiwan, Mainland China, and Myanmar, whether via religious activities such as the worship of the Buddha *Tooth* Relic, philanthropic activities, or cross-traditional exchanges by monastic delegations, the relationship between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism is better now than in the past, albeit with room for further improvement remaining (Chiu 2020). Additionally, some of my informants told me that Burmese laypeople expressed acceptance and even respect for Chinese Mahāyāna monastics, in part due to Myanmar's newfound openness to the world and the concomitant development of information networks. Notably, however, they said that Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*' identities were not well recognised or accepted in the sociocultural context of Theravāda-majority Myanmar:

*Bhikṣuṇī* (A): Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* are seen as eight-precept nuns in Myanmar. Most Sino-Burmese laypeople also see things that way. Only those few members of the laity who often come to Chinese temples know that we are *bhikṣuṇīs* [ . . . ]. The full *bhikṣuṇī* lineage of Theravāda Buddhism died out, so Burmese people do not accept *bhikṣuṇīs* of the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition. Besides, Burmese society regards men as superior to women[.]

*Bhikṣuṇī* (B): There are no [Theravāda] *bhikṣuṇīs* in Myanmar. Burmese people generally see Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* as ten-precept nuns or *śikṣamāṇās*, instead of as *bhikṣuṇīs*, because they do not understand [their true status]. But some Burmese people may know we are *bhikṣuṇīs* if they often come to Chinese temples or have more interactions with us.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (C): I was thought to be a precept nun when I went out wearing a Chinese Buddhist robe. Local people knew more Burmese precept nuns, and when I was with them they asked me whether I was a precept nun or not [due to my robe's different style and colour].

*Bhikṣuṇī* (D): People see me as a Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*.

Senior layman: There are no *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Theravāda society of Myanmar, only eight/ten-precept nuns [ . . . ]. The local ethos also affects Sino-Burmese people's thinking[.]

These excerpts raise some interesting points. First, we cannot overlook how contextual factors influence local Burmese people's perceptions of Chinese Buddhist nuns in Myanmar. The informants in question made it clear that Sino-Burmese nuns are widely assumed to be precept nuns,<sup>21</sup> even though they have been ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* based on the *Dharmaguptaka* tradition. Unsurprisingly, even some Sino-Burmese believers in Chinese Buddhism saw female monastics through this Theravāda lens. On the one hand, it would be inappropriate to condemn these people's 'ignorance' of *bhikṣuṇīs* (or indeed the style and colour of Chinese Buddhist robes), given that Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism is a minority religion that has developed quite slowly over the decades since it first arrived in Myanmar (Chiu 2020). Conversely, most laypeople in Taiwan and Mainland China do not understand Theravāda Buddhism and may inevitably 'upgrade' the status of Burmese eight/ten-precept nuns to the more familiar one of *bhikṣuṇī*. In this sense, the respective contexts and ethos of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism crucially impact people's perceptions and recognition of female monastics' identity and status. On the other hand, it should also be borne in mind that revolutionary change to a long-lasting tradition or custom is seldom easy or straightforward; previous research and my fieldwork data suggest that shifting Burmese public opinion to acceptance of female monastics as *bhikṣuṇīs* would be challenging and controversial. Ma Thissawaddy, a Burmese nun who was ordained as a *bhikṣuṇī* outside Myanmar, caused serious unrest in the Burmese *saṃgha* and society (Kawanami 2007, pp. 232–34). In her tragic case, little or no support came from Burmese nuns or laypeople; indeed, the Burmese *saṃgha* decried attempts to revive the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage as being "against the historical tradition of Burmese Buddhism" (ibid.). Given that Ma Thissawaddy failed to achieve recognition of her status despite being a member of

Myanmar's ethnolinguistic majority, it is reasonable to surmise that Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists would have no more success than she did.<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, we cannot deny that the ethnoreligious boundaries between an in-group made up of Burmese monastics and an out-group consisting of Chinese ones is clearly defined, partially because Mahāyāna and Theravāda practitioners hold imaginary versions of each other, which are very powerful, but not based on actual knowledge of the other tradition's distinctive teachings and practices. As Gustaaf Houtman (1999, p. 165) succinctly put it: "All that comes from outside is 'bad' influence, and 'alien cultural influences' are highly undesirable". This statement resonated strongly with my interviewee's comment that most Burmese people cannot accept and/or recognise *bhikṣuṇīs* of the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition due to Myanmar's historical monastic legacy.

Second, while most of my fieldwork data showed that Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* are widely perceived as precept nuns in Burmese contexts, one of them, Ven. Hongxing, explicitly told me that people saw her as a *bhikṣuṇī*. The abbess of Luohan Si, she is well-known among adherents of both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions and particularly so in Yangon. It is thus worth briefly sketching her biographical information. Ven. Hongxing 釋宏興 (b. 1960) received her full ordination in Shifang Guanyin Si, Yangon, in 1979. In 1984 she went to Bangkok, Thailand to study advanced Buddhism at Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen (水門寺), and then studied at Yuan Kuang Buddhist College (圓光佛學院) in Taiwan. After graduation in 1992, she went to Sri Lanka to study Literature at the University of Kelaniya. In 2000 she came back to Myanmar to study at Maha Santi Sukha Buddha Sasana Centre. After graduating from there in 2002, she was assigned to teach at Shifang Guanyin Si, and visited India on a pilgrimage. This was followed by visits to Singapore and Malaysia in 2003. After Ven. Hongxing was invited to take over as prior (*jianyuan* 監院) at a Buddhist temple in Bangkok, she decided to stay in Myanmar due to the shortage of teachers in Chinese Buddhist *saṃgha* education. In the same year, she commenced her work as abbess of Luohan Si. Due in part to her almost unparalleled Buddhist training all over Myanmar and in Taiwan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, she is considered a monastic of extraordinary ability (Wu 2006, p. 37). According to my fieldwork observations in her nunnery and other religious events, Ven. Hongxing indeed plays an important role in local Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism for religious propagation among the laity and in *saṃgha* education for the next generation. Unlike other nuns I interviewed, she expressed her empowerment by noting that other people see her as a *bhikṣuṇī*. Nevertheless, it would be hard to deny that she would have the power and authority to contribute even more if she were male, in the monk-dominated context of Myanmar. Unlike some Sino-Burmese nuns, who tend to focus on self-cultivation in their own nunneries, Ven. Hongxing's profound knowledge and wide experience have not only brought her a good reputation and high status but have also provided her with more connections to Burmese monks, useful when it comes to collaboration on certain cross-traditional events that will be further discussed below. While the present research did not seek to answer the question of whether indigenous Burmese monks recognised Ven. Hongxing as a *bhikṣuṇī* or not, her case provides a fresh perspective i.e., that it is not unheard of for a Sino-Burmese female monastic to be able to pursue advanced studies in various countries, return to Myanmar to propagate Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism there, and in the process win people's recognition and respect. Most importantly, her story is not only hopeful from the perspective of those wishing for the further development of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism but also established an influential model of self-reliance for next-generation nuns in monk-dominated countries.

As noted above, in Theravāda sociocultural contexts, Sino-Burmese nuns who have received full precepts are generally seen as having a lower status than they perceive themselves to have e.g., in the case of Myanmar, they are treated as *thilā-shin* instead of as *bhikṣuṇīs*. From my secular perspective, Sino-Burmese nuns' reactions and attitudes toward this phenomenon were unexpected. In other words, ordinary people generally guard their own status and secular titles jealously, but my nun informants' responses were calm and revealed no inclination to fight for their 'real' monastic status:

*Bhikṣuṇī* (A): I am used to it [i.e., being treated as a ten-precept nun in Myanmar]. I personally do not care how others see me or what they think of me. Working hard on the road to spiritual cultivation is the important thing.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (B): I can't really help it, since I live in their country [Myanmar].

*Bhikṣuṇī* (C): It is okay for me [to be seen as a *thilā-shin*]. Superficial status doesn't matter. Cultivation is to cultivate your own self.

Against this backdrop, it is worth asking whether their position as Chinese Mahāyāna nuns, i.e., outsiders to Theravāda Buddhism, is respected by local people or not. In Yangon in the 1950s, Ven. Leguan<sup>23</sup> commented that Burmese people did not consider first-generation overseas Chinese monks to be monastics, due to differences between those incomers' and their local counterparts' religious lifestyles and practices, including but not limited to robe colour, fasting after midday, and alms-begging (L. Shih 1977, p. 150). Indeed, Chinese monastics at that time seemed not to be well treated or respected in the host country (L. Shih 1977, pp. 154–55; C.-h. Shih 1931, p. 17). Therefore, I was quite curious about whether, gender factors aside, the treatment of Chinese Mahāyāna monastics in Myanmar had improved over the past half-century or so. Some of their comments relevant to this issue are reproduced below.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (A): Local Burmese people show respect to [Chinese Mahāyāna] monastics [while walking down the street . . . ]. Nuns' treatments definitely differ from monks' due to Myanmar is a patriarchal country.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (B): Local Burmese people show respect to monastics by offering their seats to them on the bus, and letting them go first when buying tickets. The laity gave more respect in the past because they were more devoted then. Nowadays, some people pay less attention to politeness [toward monastics] and rules, because of modern technology [ . . . ] [A] Burmese person disrespected me and then I let him know I was a Buddhist nun via proper communication.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (C): Local people show a certain degree of respect [to me] by kneeling down [despite thinking I am a precept nun].

*Bhikṣuṇī* (D): Some taxi drivers refuse to allow us to pay our fares. On some occasions, Burmese people who see Chinese nuns have given us priority, without claiming that we are not really Buddhist monastics.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (E): It is a fact that Chinese Buddhist monastics are not well respected in Myanmar [ . . . but the] Sino-Burmese laity who come to Chinese temples show us due respect.

The above fieldwork data touch upon several important points regarding Sino-Burmese nuns' relationship to the local value/norm of inherent respect for monastics in general and Burmese people's respect in Theravāda-majority Myanmar. First, the Sino-Burmese nuns I interviewed appeared to have received better treatment and more religious recognition than first-generation Chinese monastics in Burma did in Ven. Leguan's time, i.e., the middle decades of the twentieth century. According to my fieldwork observations in 2018, and Feng-Yng Wu's (2006, p. 119) personal experience as a Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇī* in the early part of the present century, some local Burmese people in Yangon showed respect to Sino-Burmese nuns not only by offering their seats to them on buses but also by joining their palms as a respectful greeting, whether inside Buddhist monasteries or outside on the street.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, however, we cannot overlook the fact that my interviewees had either experienced impoliteness or mentioned that people treated monks and nuns differently in their host country. Males'/monks' predominance over females/nuns may, after all, be an important factor in Sino-Burmese nuns' treatment in Myanmar, and one that is worth exploring more.

In broad outline, Burmese women seem relatively emancipated, and historically enjoyed a privileged position in comparison to other Asian women, marked by considerable independence of action (Mya Sein 1958). Nevertheless, women still face many injustices and inequalities under certain Burmese cultural taboos. One well-known and typical instance is the old Burmese tradition that men who pass under women's *longyi* (sarongs) drying on clotheslines will lose their masculine power, known in Burmese as *hpone*. Additionally, women including Buddhist nuns are not allowed to approach or touch the stones or Buddha statues of some famous sacred Buddhist sites, including the Mahamuni Buddha Temple and Kyaiktiyo Pagoda, also known as Golden Rock. This religious exclusion clearly reflects a certain degree of gender prejudice toward women in Burmese culture.

Buddhist texts also fundamentally influence Burmese people's perceptions of the sexes' superiority or inferiority. Mya Sein, a Burmese female author and advocate for women's equality during British rule, explicitly pointed out that Burmese people believe the next Buddha coming to this world will be male, and that for a woman to achieve this status she would first need to be reborn as a boy. This belief thus "gives men an inherent superiority" and allows them to "reach higher than women" (Mya Sein 1958). Similarly, Melford Spiro, who conducted most of his fieldwork in Burma in the 1960s, pointed out that many of his female respondents wanted to be reborn male, since men's superiority can be manifested in various ways: "[O]nly a male can be a Buddha, males are 'nobler than females, males have a pleasanter life than females . . .'" (Spiro 1970, pp. 82n–83n). On the other hand, monks as males in this complex cultural context have generally received unusually intense veneration from the Burmese laity. As Spiro noted, "[t]here is probably no other clergy in the world which receives as much honor and respect as are offered the Buddhist monks of Burma" (Spiro 1970, p. 396). Furthermore, due to being female, Burmese eight/ten-precept nuns—despite their ambivalent position between the religious and secular worlds—are subordinated to monks (Kawanami 1990; Carbonnel 2009).<sup>25</sup> While there is a visible gap in social-status ranking and gender differences in Burmese Buddhist communities between indigenous monks and precept nuns, I would argue that Sino-Burmese nuns' positions and experiences are subjected to what might be called "double suffering": as female monastics, they suffer patriarchal gender inequality similar to local precept nuns, while also experiencing marginalisation due to their minority status as Mahāyāna and ethnically Chinese "pagans" living in a Theravāda-majority, Burman-majority land.

To sum up, my fieldwork data confirm that most of my *bhikṣuṇī* interviewees were misidentified as precept nuns by local people, chiefly because of the lack of *bhikṣuṇī* lineages in Theravāda Buddhism. However, rather than treating this as a challenge to their monastic status, which they said they regarded as superficial in any case, my informants focused on their own spiritual cultivation. It is nevertheless worth noting that these fully ordained Sino-Burmese nuns—living in the sociocultural context of Theravāda-majority Myanmar, where monks are disproportionately powerful compared to nuns—could not avoid gender injustice and/or hostility towards their minority religious position. On the positive side, however, they appeared to be receiving more respect from the Burmese laity than in the past. The next section explores these nuns' interactions and relationships with monks, whether local Burmese or fellow Chinese ones.

### 3. Interactions and Relationships among Burmese Theravāda Monks, Chinese Mahāyāna Monks, and Chinese Mahāyāna Nuns

This section explores gender issues, and in particular, whether Myanmar's indigenous sociocultural ethos (e.g., monks' superior status to nuns; the extinction of *bhikṣuṇīs*) affect Sino-Burmese nuns' religious life and practices when they interact with local monks. For example, are the eight *gurudharma* rules more strictly observed when Mahāyāna nuns interact with Theravāda monks (e.g., do the nuns bow to them) in comparison to when they interact with Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna monks? It is also worth exploring whether Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣus* have been influenced by the local atmosphere in their treatment of female colleagues.



Before presenting the analysis of my fieldwork findings regarding these gender issues, it will be useful to take a brief look at the historical background of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in the sociocultural context of Theravāda-majority Myanmar, where Buddhist monks are highly influential. Unsurprisingly, the ethnic and religious boundaries between local Burmese monks and overseas first-generation Chinese monastics were hard to break through, partially due to the deep historical antagonism between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools. Theravāda Buddhists typically hold strong views of their religious identity, take their own traditions to constitute Orthodox Buddhism (Swearer 2006, p. 83), and express suspicions that various aspects of the Mahāyāna tradition lack authenticity. Conversely, Theravāda practitioners are often derogated as “the vehicle of the hearers” by Mahāyāna Buddhists, a reference to the role of the Buddha’s early followers who sought to become *Arhats* through hearing and practising his teachings. In the eyes of many Mahāyāna polemicists, these hearers are too narrowly focused on individual salvation, as opposed to the path of the *bodhisattva*, which aims at all beings’ liberation. This strong antagonism was expressed very quickly when first-generation Chinese monks arrived in Burma (Chiu 2020, pp. 220–24). In Yangon in the 1950s, the Ven. Leguan met overseas Chinese monks who considered themselves to be Mahāyāna *bodhisattva*, and on that basis had never made contact with local Burmese monks who practiced “Hīnayāna” Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> However, he found that Burmese monks did not recognise Chinese ones as the Buddha’s disciples, even deeming them heretics in some cases, and on that basis refused to associate with them (L. Shih 1977, pp. 154–55). Alongside this historical antagonism between the two Buddhist traditions, language barriers experienced by the first generation of Chinese monks made cross-traditional dialogue and understanding even less possible in that period. Recent generations of Sino-Burmese monastics, however, are bilingual in Mandarin and Burmese and have grown up in Burmese society with a certain degree of assimilation; but whether this change has provided a boost to cross-traditional dialogue has been under-explored.

The first example I present here is Zhonghua Si, the oldest nunnery in Yangon (Wu 2006, p. 43). Almost every time I visited this institution, which is close to the Shwedagon Pagoda and the various Theravāda monasteries that surround it, I saw a particular middle-aged Burmese monk come to the main hall to worship the Buddha by offering flowers, and some other local monks who seemed to be in the habit of stopping by and engaging the abbess in friendly conversation. Other Burmese monks could also be seen teaching younger Sino-Burmese *śrāmaṇerīs* there (Figures 1 and 2). I was even told by an informant nun that Theravāda monks living around this temple knew that Chinese Mahāyāna monastics eat *Yaoshi* (medicine stone)<sup>27</sup> and sometimes came to eat dinner with them.



Figure 1. The abbess of Zhonghua Si having a friendly chat with a Burmese monk (Source: Author).



**Figure 2.** A Burmese monk teaching female novices at Zhonghua Si (Source: Author).

This raises some interesting points. For one, the contacts I observed between Sino-Burmese Mahāyāna monastics and Burmese Theravāda monks at Zhonghua Si seemed to be more harmonious than in the past, or even collaborative, as well as more frequent. However, we cannot deny that the long-standing antagonism between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools will not be easy to resolve due to differences in doctrine, religious practices, and views of the ultimate goal, among other matters. Likewise, a broadly conflictual relationship still exists between these traditions, and should not be overlooked. For example, one of my informant nuns in Yangon told me that the Theravāda teacher at her Buddhist educational centre asked the male novices there not to worship Avalokiteshvara (*Guanyin* 觀音) because she is female and considered a deity. Additionally, a Burmese layman pointed out to me that Burmese people only know Shakyamuni Buddha, but do not know Amitabha Buddha (*Amitufo* 阿彌陀佛) or Medicine Buddha (*Yaoshifo* 藥師佛). In other words, some key elements of Mahāyāna tradition were neither understood nor accepted by local Burmese monastics and laity as of 2018–2019.<sup>28</sup>

Second, the interpersonal interactions I observed—chatting, teaching, eating, and just dropping by—demonstrated not only that the relationship between Zhonghua Si’s nuns as second- and third-generation Sino-Burmese monastics and their host-country Theravāda counterparts was broadly better than the relations between Theravāda and Mahāyāna monastics in the middle decades of the twentieth century; they also seemed to support the idea that Burmese as a shared language was crucial to widening the channels of communication between these two groups of practitioners. Indeed, I would argue that without this shared language, it would not be possible to break the ethnoreligious boundaries between Chinese Mahāyāna and local Theravāda Buddhists, given the marginalised statuses not only of the former religious tradition but of Sino-Burmese ethnicity. What surprised me most was that a few local monks came to Zhonghua Si to eat supper with Sino-Burmese nuns, which ran contrary to the widely perceived strictness of Theravāda Buddhists’ adherence to fasting after midday (Chiu 2015), and implied a strong relationship of trust between my informant nun and her Theravāda counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

Lastly, but no less importantly, was the cross-traditional collaboration in education that I observed.<sup>30</sup> Zhonghua Si was similar to other Chinese Buddhist monasteries I visited in Myanmar in having a learning centre for young ethnic-Chinese monastics,<sup>31</sup> and during my fieldwork in such places, I sometimes observed Theravāda monks or local *thilā-shin* teaching young novices, often in subjects requiring knowledge (e.g., of Pāli) that most Sino-Burmese abbots and abbesses lacked. On the one hand, we can see this educational cooperation not merely as an index of the improved relationship between the two traditions, but also

potentially as a manifestation of the future development of Buddhism via cross-traditional collaboration or even union. On the other, given that the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition has minority status in Myanmar, its destiny will depend critically on future generations of well-educated monks and nuns, conversant in both the Burmese language and Pāli doctrines, who can continue to propagate it via verbal preaching to both Burmese laypeople and Sino-Burmese ones who have undergone strong Burmanization. Better education, in turn, will tend to improve the status of Chinese Mahāyāna monastics in Myanmar. As Susanne Mrozik (2009, p. 365) aptly put it, “across the Buddhist world, the status of [monastics] is most directly linked to their levels of education in Buddhist canonical languages, scripture and philosophy.” Unsurprisingly, against this backdrop, some Sino-Burmese abbots and abbesses I met paid careful attention to the next generation’s education. All that being said, however, it must be borne in mind that Zhonghua Si is not fully representative of the contemporary Chinese Mahāyāna monastic scene in Myanmar, especially insofar as it is surrounded by various Theravāda monasteries. As such, research findings about the two traditions’ interactions in other monastic institutions in different regions, and whose Sino-Burmese abbots/abbesses differ in their individual characteristics including language skills and *saṅgha*-management preferences, will inevitably vary.

A second instance that will help to broaden the present discussion of gender perspectives was the 6th Southeast Asia Sangha Offering Puja in Yangon, organised by Ciguang Si 慈光寺 in Taiwan and held on 8 September 2018.<sup>32</sup> The abbot of Ciguang Si, Ven. Hui Kong 惠空, collaborated with Luohan Temple (now a Chinese Buddhist nunnery), donating money and offering lunch to more than a thousand monastics in the Insein Ruama Pariyatti Institute (緬甸仰光巴利文僧伽學院). During this offering event,<sup>33</sup> the dean of this Pāli College, Sayadaw U Tiloka Bhivamsa (因聖亞瑪大師), and 1187 Burmese monks joined Chinese Mahāyāna monastics and laypeople from both Taiwan and Myanmar in the Main Hall for Buddhist chanting and mutual conversation, with Luohan Temple’s abbess (Ven. Hongxing) serving as a moderator and translator. This event was a very important manifestation of the Mahāyāna/Theravāda cross-traditional dialogue and cooperation that has been increasingly prevalent in recent years. More importantly, while attending this event, I witnessed some interesting phenomena that corroborated the received wisdom on unequal gender relationships in the monk-dominated context of Myanmar. First, I observed that Sino-Burmese nuns (both *bhikṣuṇīs* and female novices) sat at lower levels than senior monks (Figure 3) and that Ven. Hongxing knelt next to senior and influential Burmese monks when translating or discussing (Figures 4 and 5). It was likewise unsurprising that other Buddhist nuns attending this event were seated among the Taiwanese and Sino-Burmese laity, i.e., in the front row, instead of at the centre of the meeting room with the male monastics.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 3.** Monks seated at higher levels than Sino-Burmese nuns while posing for photos (Source: Author).





**Figure 4.** Ven. Hongxing kneeling next to influential senior Burmese monks during an event (Source: Author).



**Figure 5.** During a lunchtime discussion, two monks sit in chairs while *bhikṣuṇī* Hongxing kneels on the floor (Source: Author).

As a scholar from Taiwan, where *bhikṣuṇīs*' status continues to rise inexorably amid a general atmosphere of gender equality (Heirman and Chiu 2012), these arrangements seemed to me to reflect rank—noble vs. base—through the differentiation of high/low positioning, and to reveal subtle power negotiations and competitions among the various participants (see Bourdieu 1996). Specifically, the Burmese monks' higher positions clearly reflected their greater sociocultural capital in Theravāda-majority Myanmar, relative to that of their female counterparts, regardless of Mahāyāna or Theravāda tradition. As Melford Spiro (1970, p. 398) noted, “[a]t public gatherings the monk sits above the laymen on a platform or dais”, as a way of showing reverence for the former; but Ven. Hongxing and other senior as well as junior Buddhist nuns attending this event were female monastics but sat together with laity, instead of being arranged in the areas with other less-senior Burmese monastics. These seating phenomena raise three important questions. Did the local Theravāda ethos underlie Chinese Mahāyāna nuns' gendered experiences of subordination to Burmese monks at this formal event? Did Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* want to be on a par with the local Burmese monks while attending it? And what did these nuns think of bowing to monks in a Theravāda host country?<sup>35</sup> My informants answered them as follows.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (A): Myanmar belongs to the Theravāda tradition, in which the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage has historically died out [ ... ]. Monks in Myanmar and other Theravāda Buddhist countries do not recognise the existence of Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* and see us as novices. We cannot sit on an equal footing with monks [ ... ] I personally will respect the rules [about not sitting at the same height as monks] if I go to Theravāda temples [ ... ]. I recognise myself [as a *bhikkhuni*] and do not care how others see me, because this is the local custom and tendency that we cannot change and don't have the ability to change.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (C): Hardly any Theravāda countries either recognise our *Vinaya* [i.e., the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*] or the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts. [Monks] do not recognise my *bhikṣuṇī* identity since the *bhikṣuṇīs* order does not exist [here ... ]. One Taiwanese monastic group came to Myanmar for cultural-exchange events. However, Buddhist nuns were arranged to sit under the stage and wondered why they could not sit on the stage [with the monks ... ]. But it was impossible because those monks were the National Saṃgha Committee Chairman and senior monks. Our master taught us that we must accept local culture even though we are *bhikṣuṇīs* [...]. We need to be humble and act in a low-key way[.]

*Bhikṣuṇī* (D): Monks and nuns are sharply distinguished in Myanmar [ ... because] there are only precept nuns and no *bhikṣuṇīs* here [ ... ]. We respect their customs and keep a low profile[.]

Importantly, I would not describe these key informant nuns as either conservative or poorly educated. Rather, as well as having good educational backgrounds, they all had international experience. So, far from endorsing the local subordination of nuns to monks, their failure to struggle against it could be ascribable to their focus on their own spiritual cultivation, as opposed to striving for status recognition. On the other hand, however, these Sino-Burmese nuns could be seen as making excuses for having assimilated into the local ethos of gender hierarchy, despite their assertions of having *maintained a sense of continuity with the key characteristics of Chinese Buddhism*. Be that as it may, given their doubly marginalised status as both members of a religious minority and as inferior members of an unequal gender hierarchy, Sino-Burmese nuns did not feel they could challenge or change the domination of Buddhism by monks in Myanmar. It is also worth noting a further reason that these self-aware nuns gave for keeping a low profile in Theravāda-majority Myanmar: to ensure Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism's continued development there. As such, we should not overlook the fact that, in the dynamic encounters between minority outsiders and majority insiders when the former enter the latter's territory, it is difficult and sometimes impossible for the newcomers to reform and challenge the locals' cultural mainstream and its taboos. In other words, it might in fact be both unwise and useless for Sino-Burmese nuns to stage a rebellion against local Burmese monastic authority aimed at gaining recognition for their *bhikṣuṇī* identity and/or equal seat allocation with monks (e.g., the case of Ma Thissawaddy in Myanmar), given the negative impact such a rebellion could have on their religious life and, indeed, on Mahāyāna Buddhism's local survival. Instead, some of my informant nuns adopted a strategy of donation to local charities and medical provision (see also [Chen 2015](#), pp. 25, 33, 41) to interact and build mutual understanding with Theravāda monks and allow Theravāda Buddhism to—so to speak—*catch glimpses* of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the way to the latter potentially gaining a societal foothold. Simply put, giving donations is an obvious way of exhibiting one's friendliness and goodwill across ethnic and religious boundaries, the positive results of which can be realized quickly.

There has been considerable attention and debate among academics on the *gurudharma* rule mandating bowing: that, even if a nun has been ordained for a hundred years, she must rise up from her seat when seeing a newly ordained monk, and must pay obeisance and offer him a place to sit. For example, [Owen \(2003, p. 9\)](#) criticised the Buddha's use of the eight rules to relegate *bhikṣuṇī* to a "disadvantaged position and second-rate status".



Several generations earlier, I.B. Horner (1930, p. 121) recognised that almswomen were limited by this rule and wrote that it was “the outcome of an age-old and widespread tradition rather than a prudent provision to keep women in their place”. Lorna Dewaraja (1999, p. 73) noted that although Mahāprajāpatī and her followers were given permission to establish the order of nuns, the price they paid was control by and inferiority to the monks. Rita Gross (1993, p. 37) took a similar view, that the core of each rule was followed by reinforcement of this “gender hierarchy”. While exploring the interaction between monks and nuns in terms of this rule’s implementation, however, we should not overlook the impacts of social contexts and cultural customs. For instance, nuns’ practice of paying homage to monks via bowing indicates complex implications in Chinese contexts (Chiu and Heirman 2014). In contemporary Taiwan, kneeling down to anyone is not a socially common custom, and thus is likely to carry heavier hierarchical implications there than in cultures where it is fairly commonplace, such as in South Asia (Tsomo 2004; Cheng 2007). In Myanmar, every layperson—including even the head of state and the monks’ own parents—are required to worship monks by kneeling and touching their foreheads “to the floor or ground three times” (Spiro 1970, p. 397). Against this backdrop, it is worth recounting the perceptions of bowing in Myanmar held by my key informant nuns, all of whom had either studied abroad or stayed in Taiwan for other reasons.

*Bhikṣuṇī* (A): There is no high standard to practice the *gurudharma* in Mahāyāna monasteries [ . . . But Buddhist nuns] need to respect monks by bowing for the implementation of the *gurudharma* when they go to Theravāda monasteries[.]

*Bhikṣuṇī* (C): There is no habit [of bowing in Taiwan]. But I will pay homage to monks here [ . . . ]. Male monastics are more senior than female ones in precepts. This is respect: I respect him as a *bhikkhu* and also respect his robe. I understand my *bhikṣuṇī* precepts: even though I have been ordained 20 years, I still bow to our male novices. I do not mind paying homage to them since I agree with the Buddha about observing the precepts. You can see how humble you are while bowing [ . . . Yet, in this institution], I am the only nun who bows to novices [ . . . One] told me that his [Theravāda] master commended me for understanding the precepts well in life [ . . . ]. The *saṃgha* shall be harmonious if everyone pays attention to this for mutual respect[.]

*Bhikṣuṇī* (B): We as nuns of course need to kneel down to monks. Monks themselves pay homage to their masters upon seeing them. If my ordination was years before yours, you must bow to me if you see me between monks. Eight- and ten-precept nuns also bow to monks and their student nuns do too. Laypeople also kneel down to them [i.e., precept nuns]. I feel that Theravāda Buddhism is doing better than Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism when it comes to respecting senior masters [ . . . ]. Monastics and laypeople in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism are unlike those in Theravāda Buddhism, who respect teachers and monastics by kneeling down thoroughly.

These excerpts raise interesting points that we cannot overlook. First, it is clear that sociocultural factors crucially affected my informant nuns’ ways of thinking and behaving, even though they had experienced an atmosphere of near gender equality in Taiwanese Buddhism,<sup>36</sup> in line with the English proverb, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This demonstrates how important it can be for religious-minority outsiders to modify their practices through processes of localisation. Second, one of my informant nuns praised the local Theravāda ethos of paying homage to senior monks and teachers as a mark of respect. Her comment opens up a fresh perspective on the issue of bowing, one that transcends many researchers’ narrow foci on gender hierarchy or inequality and highlights the importance of not making hasty judgments of other religions and practices based on our own cultural biases or, worse, an innate if unconscious sense of our own superiority. As Rita Gross (2005, p. 22) warned us, we should “be careful not to project our feminist values onto the religious and cultural situations of other times and places.” In this spirit of seeing

phenomena from outside the so-called feminist angle, I re-examined my photos and videos of the donation ceremony and other key moments from my fieldwork and usually could see Burmese junior monks kneeling down to their teachers or well-known masters when meeting them (Figure 6), revealing a more complex state of affairs than accounts based on gender hierarchy alone would tend to suggest.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 6.** Monks and a layman talk to Sayadaw U Tiloka Bhivamsa and pay homage to him before an event (Source: Author).

While this section's focus is on cross-tradition interactions and relationships between Burmese monks and Chinese Mahāyāna nuns, it is also an attempt to paint a more general and realistic picture of how contemporary Sino-Burmese monks may have been influenced by indigenous cultural characteristics, and in particular, monks' status as superior to nuns, even though Sino-Burmese nuns in contemporary Myanmar outnumber their Chinese male counterparts. One of my key informant monks in Yangon stressed that female renunciants—whether local precept nuns or Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*—could not sit on an equal footing with Burmese monks, and that Burmese *bhikkhus*' seat allocations are based on their years of ordination. Additionally, this informant monk strongly emphasised to me that, even though Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* could not sit with Chinese monks as their equals in some formal Buddhist ceremonies because of the local cultural context and *gurudharma* rules, they could nevertheless be photographed standing together on informal occasions. It is clear that an external contextual factor, which can be summed up as the Burmese ethos, has exerted considerable influence on how Sino-Burmese nuns are expected to behave even in settings where only Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists are present.

In another fieldwork observation at a monastery in Yangon, I saw a very old nun and one younger nun around 30–40 years old working together in the kitchen, cooking for the whole male Chinese monastic population (novices and *bhikkhus*), though a few male novices assisted these nuns as part of their monastic training (Figure 7). When I asked the abbot why these two nuns were responsible for cooking work, he simply replied that the nuns were expert at it.

His comment spontaneously reminded me of Taiwanese master Ven. Guang Qin,<sup>38</sup> who believed that to have been born a woman was a result of karmic obstacles; and for that reason, he required all his nun followers to first complete seven years' work in the kitchen as the basis of their spiritual practice (Shi 1994, pp. 79, 105, 196; Li 1999, pp. 98, 110). Yu-chen Li (1999, p. 98) likewise indicated that to be a Buddhist nun in post-war Taiwan was virtually the same as being a cook. Currently, many competent and well-educated nuns in the largest dual-*samgha*<sup>39</sup> Buddhist institutions in Taiwan (e.g., Dharma Drum Mountain, Fo Guang Shan, Chung Tai Chan Monastery) are engaged in various forms of contribution and service to Buddhism and society, rather than cooking food as the daily focus of their religious lives.



**Figure 7.** Two *bhikṣuṇīs* working in a kitchen, cooking for male monastics (Source: Author).

In the case of the above-mentioned young Sino-Burmese nun working in the monastery kitchen in Yangon, a senior layman knew her background well and shared details of it with me. This nun had graduated from one university in Myanmar before becoming the old nun's disciple and following her example by cooking and doing other work in the kitchen. Some people, including the layman I was speaking to, felt it was a pity for a nun with a good education to work in the kitchen, and they had tried to persuade her to better herself by studying at the Burmese Buddhist College. The young nun, however, declined such opportunities, partially due to the Burmese context and partially due to her concern for her master, whom (she thought) no one could work with if she left. Based on the layman's remarks, this nun in the future after her master dies might become stuck in a primary role of cooking in a monastery kitchen for Sino-Burmese monks, unless she personally wants to change her fate and situation through self-empowerment or even resistance.

To me, this incident starkly illustrated the constraints of Chinese female monastics' development in Myanmar, due to both the Burmese cultural context and the preference for traditional mentorship over formal education. On the one hand, we can see the profound loyalty of the young nun to her master, in line with the English proverb, "A day as a teacher, a lifetime as a father." Going against the grain of the high percentage of Sino-Burmese novices and monks who disrobe, the younger nun showed her determination in this working environment that was obviously inappropriate to her education level. On the other hand, we cannot ignore that this nun's situation reflected the relative lack of good learning programmes at Buddhist monastic colleges for Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists in Myanmar.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, every cloud has a silver lining: despite the fact that the local context and monastic learning settings were generally unfavourable to Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs*' development, some talented Sino-Burmese nuns study abroad<sup>41</sup> and then return to Myanmar, not only to foster the future of the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition there but also to create their own ways of propagating it. For example, *bhikṣuṇī* Hongxing told me that she not only taught Sino-Burmese male novices in a monastery but also had experience of instructing *bhikṣus* in Chinese learning. Her excellent education and monastic experience indeed led her to win people's recognition and inspire many younger Sino-Burmese nuns in the Burmese context of monks' superior status to nuns. Of course, we cannot deny the fact of gender restraint; as one of my informant monks said, Ven. Hongxing's influence as a leader of Chinese Buddhism in Myanmar would be more powerful if she were a monk.

Most importantly, contemporary female Chinese monastics play an indispensable role in overseas Chinese communities that we cannot overlook, regardless of whether they are seen as *bhikṣuṇīs* or precept nuns by the ethnic-Chinese laity. The next section explores the interrelationship between Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* and the ethnic-Chinese laity in this Theravadin Burman-majority nation.

#### 4. The Role of Chinese *Bhikṣuṇīs* in the Sino-Burmese Community

Generally speaking, monks play an important role as the recipients of lay benefactions, as part of a complex interdependent relationship between Buddhist clergy and laity in Myanmar. The existence of monks is, metaphorically, a “field of merit” in which laypeople “‘plant’ good deeds and ‘reap’ the consequence of their improved karmic states” (Kawanami 2013, p. 131). Most importantly, Burmese people hold the view that they can obtain more merit by donating to those monks who have the most monastic purity (i.e., observe the rules most strictly), in line with Spiro’s comment that “the amount of merit acquired from alms-giving is proportional to the piety of the recipient” (Spiro 1970, p. 412). In other words, lay donors make a bad merit investment by offering to less-virtuous monks; and it is thus logical for them to donate to monks they respect and admire. Against this backdrop, Burmese precept nuns are unquestionably in a more vulnerable situation, since they occupy a status that is both inherently ambiguous, and unquestionably inferior to that of monks (see Kawanami 2013, pp. 131–51; 2020, pp. 95–118). The aim of this section, therefore, is to explore current Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs*’ roles and interactions with the ethnic-Chinese laity in Myanmar.

My key lay informant, who was over 80 years old, had witnessed the historic decline and development of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Myanmar. Based on his personal experience, he told me that in places in the country where Sino-Burmese people generally had been influenced by local culture, there were only precept nuns, no *bhikṣuṇīs*. The Sino-Burmese laity, he said, usually requested that Chinese Mahāyāna monks conduct the Ceremony for the Liberation of the Deceased.<sup>42</sup> In the past in Upper Burma, relatively few people supported Sino-Burmese nuns, some of whom even ran small businesses such as food pickling to make ends meet. They suffered considerably and received poor Buddhist educations due to the traditional master–disciple system. But nowadays, he told me, more laypeople were going to nunneries to make donations than in the past.

My first-hand data indeed resonated with this informant’s comments about increased levels of ethnic-Chinese lay support for current Chinese nunneries. Below, I will discuss two nunneries from among my fieldwork sites as cases of interaction and interdependence between Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* and local ethnic-Chinese laity in *dharma* services and rituals.<sup>43</sup> Generally speaking, Chinese nunneries and monasteries’ major lay supporters are drawn from the less de-Sinicized Yunnanese group, rather than the Burmanized Hokkien or Cantonese ones. I attended one *dharma* service on 10 September 2018, the first day of the lunar month, in Miaoyin Si 妙音寺.<sup>44</sup> In the early morning before the beginning of the *dharma* service, some female laypeople came to this nunnery and prepared vegetarian food for the day’s lunch. The abbess of Miaoyin Si, Ven. Miaoci, was so busy greeting attendees and checking everything for the *dharma* service that she did not have time to talk with me before the ceremony. This senior nun, aged more than 70, was charismatic and friendly, and had attracted the long-term loyalty of many Sino-Burmese laypeople, who supported her nunnery’s construction projects and year-round *dharma* services. I saw numerous different donors’ names and the amounts they had given, in written and printed Chinese,<sup>45</sup> adorning many parts of the nunnery’s interior (Figure 8).

During the ceremony, the senior nun led around forty, mostly female attendees in chanting the Eighty-eight Buddha Repentance Service and the Sutra of the Medicine Buddha for blessings and elimination of calamities. The ritual atmosphere was harmonious; I observed laypeople assisting each other while chanting. The senior nun did not give a *dharma* talk after the ceremony ended. During the lunch, more than 100 people ate large vegetarian meals offered by devoted laypeople (Figure 9). Ven. Miaoci interacted extensively with those who were eating, greeting them table-by-table and announcing in Mandarin and Burmese that the next *dharma* service would be held on the 15th day of the same lunar month. Some laypeople entertained the others by singing songs. After lunch, the majority of the laity left the nunnery, but a few stayed and chatted with the abbess. One old and wealthy laywoman explicitly told me that she had followed and supported this nun since she was young. Many of the laywomen that this nun’s charismatic presence



had attracted over many years did not need to work after marriage, and they had ample time to worship at different temples and donate money for merit accumulation. From my observations, it is clear that an older-generation Sino-Burmese nun who did not study abroad can be well supported by local ethnic-Chinese Buddhist devotees in Myanmar, despite her supposedly inferior nun's identity. Additionally, my data suggest that this Chinese Buddhist nunnery functioned not only as a religious site for the laity but also as an important venue in which members of Myanmar's Chinese ethnic minority could seek social connections and mutual assistance.<sup>46</sup> This fieldwork observation significantly resonated with Kawanami's (2013) point (p. 131) that Buddhist temples in Myanmar are essential "social venues" in which people can network with those of different social ranks, share information, and redistribute money.



Figure 8. Hand-written donors' names and donated amounts (Source: Author).



Figure 9. Sino-Burmese laypeople eating together after a Buddhist ceremony on the 1st day of the lunar month (Source: Author).

The other case I would like to present is Luohan Si, where the well-known *bhikṣuṇī* Ven. Hongxing is the abbess. On 9 September 2018, I attended a *Ksitigarbha* Bodhisattva Sutra Dharma Service at Luohan Si, and upon entering was struck by a sense of familiarity:



the main hall was decorated like those of some of the nunneries or monasteries I had visited in Taiwan. Ven. Hongxing studied abroad, at Yuan Kuang Buddhist College in Taiwan, an experience that had clearly influenced her way of managing as well as refurbishing her nunnery. For example, a contingent of Sino-Burmese volunteers had been very well developed, to the point that the abbess did not need to recruit people to cook and clean.<sup>47</sup> I also noted that many Sino-Burmese laywomen attended the *dharma* service she held because of her already established reputation in local ethnic Chinese Buddhist communities. Some laity chanted the sutra, and some just knelt down without chanting, presumably because they could not read Chinese. What surprised me most was that Ven. Hongxing gave the attendees a *dharma* lecture after the end of the ceremony, in which she explained the Ksitigarbha Sutra in Mandarin Chinese and encouraged the laity to study more sutras, as a means of becoming better Buddhists (Figure 10). Laywomen of various ages paid close attention to what the abbess was teaching them.



**Figure 10.** Sino-Burmese laity listening to Ven. Hongxing giving a lecture at Luohan Si (Source: Author).

Based on my own observations, giving such Buddhist talks—either after rituals or to Sino-Burmese laypeople—is rare in Myanmar; and many of my monastic and lay informants confirmed that the norm among overseas Chinese was to come to Buddhist temples to burn incense, worship the Buddha, chant sutras, and pray for family or individual blessings and fortunes, not to learn about Buddhism in any profound way. Some of them could not even distinguish between *bodhisattvas* and folk deities.<sup>48</sup> Those who were interested in Buddhist *dharma* knowledge would go to Theravāda monasteries to be taught by Burmese monks.<sup>49</sup> Nor is this situation particular to Myanmar: well-known Chinese Buddhist monks who migrated to Singapore (e.g., Ven. Yen Pei 演培) and Malaysia (e.g., Ven. Chuk Mor 竺摩) have observed and experienced similar phenomena (Chia 2020).

On the one hand, it is clear that most of the Sino-Burmese Buddhist laity's worship of the Buddha in Buddhist monasteries has a strong utilitarian tendency,<sup>50</sup> much as Han Chinese believers in folk religion pray to deities in temples (see Lai 2003, p. 58; Li 2010, pp. 276–77). This attitude toward religion is not uncommon in Chinese communities, whether in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, or Myanmar, in line with the well-known Chinese proverb, “the more deities they worshipped, the more blessings they would receive” (Chia 2020, p. 58). One middle-aged monk who had studied abroad in Mainland China and returned to Mandalay took over a Buddhist temple from an elderly monastic relative and expressed a strong view of how difficult it had been for him to make changes to the Sino-Burmese laity's perceptions of Buddhism. Likewise, I attended one *ullambana* ceremony at Jingming Chan Si in lunar July and witnessed a lead-

ing monk give a *dharma* talk in Yunnanese about making merit and practicing wholesome deeds for the laity's deceased relatives before the chanting of sutras in the afternoon. Again, however, many older laypeople fell asleep while the monk was teaching. What surprised me was that many of those among the laity who looked absent-minded during the talk chanted loudly and sincerely when the ceremony subsequently began.

An interesting contrast to this was provided by the Burmese Theravāda laity. On one full-moon Sunday in Yangon, on the recommendation of a taxi driver, I visited a Theravāda monastery and observed the interaction between Burmese monks and the local Burmese laity during a Buddhist *dharma* lecture. Upon arriving in the lecture hall, I could sense a completely different atmosphere there. Around thirty local people attended this lecture (Figure 11), and—as my driver had promised—the lecturer was very charismatic and engaging. Most significantly, interactions between the speaker and listeners were frequent. The laypeople usually responded to the master by nodding their heads and echoing/repeating his words while listening and learning.<sup>51</sup> In short, their attitude toward *dharma* learning was far more enthusiastic than that of the Sino-Burmese laypeople I observed elsewhere, whose focus, in line with my informants' prior remarks, was on ritual rather than *dharma* learning.



**Figure 11.** Burmese laity listening attentively as a master lectures (Source: Author).

On the other hand, the relative lack of *dharma* lectures by Chinese Mahāyāna monastics could help explain the defects in the laity's Buddhist knowledge. *Dharma* teaching is challenging, especially so if the monastic delivering it has not received appropriate Buddhist education and training. As I mentioned in a previous section, there is a profound gap in such education and training between elderly and middle-aged Sino-Burmese nuns. In part, this is because first- and second-generation overseas monastics tended to focus mainly on individual spiritual cultivation, by chanting sutras and conducting rituals under mentorship. Therefore, these earlier-generation monks and nuns could only perform the liturgy and rites that overseas Chinese communities needed, and the teaching of Buddhist knowledge was completely de-prioritised. Alongside the Sino-Burmese laity's above-mentioned utilitarian tendency, it is worth considering how, and how much, this historical legacy has influenced the ways of preaching and teaching Chinese Buddhism in Myanmar (and, indeed, in other overseas Chinese Buddhist communities). Most importantly, we should not ignore the fact that the slow development of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Myanmar has in part been due to a relative scarcity of learned Chinese migrant monks, who—if they had been more numerous—might have reformed or modernised it there, much as Ven. Yen Pei and Ven. Chuk Mor did on the Chinese periphery in Singapore and Malaysia (Chia 2020).<sup>52</sup> In other words, the development of Buddhism is inextricably bound up with the development of Buddhist learning and education.



Let us return now to Ven. Hongxing's Buddhist lecturing activity in contemporary Myanmar. Atypically, she gives *dharma* talks after ceremonies in her nunnery for her lay disciples, providing them with a certain degree of Buddhist education. From my observations, this nun appeared to be doing so, despite the obvious challenges involved, based on strong religious convictions regarding the propagation of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Myanmar. During the lunch at one such event, Ven. Hongxing—like Ven. Miaoci—engaged in chit-chat with ritual attendees, and clearly recognised which laypeople had been there before vs. which had come for the first time. Additionally, some laywomen familiar with the abbess consulted her about their family problems and religious questions.

From the two cases I presented here, and fieldwork observation in other nunneries, I can conclude that Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* are indeed important to the ethnic-Chinese laity in Myanmar, particularly laywomen. Partially owing to their being of the same sex, and therefore lacking the boundaries between male monastics and female laity, it is much more convenient for female laypeople to consult nuns about their personal problems (e.g., about marriage) since a nun may understand and empathise with difficulties specific to being a woman better than a monk can. Most importantly, each nun has her own leadership style and personality that can attract laypeople with various characteristics to support her nunnery. For instance, some might be drawn to Ven. Hongxing's nunnery as a Buddhist learning centre, while others might prefer Ven. Miaoci's as a religious venue for social networking. Also, while many of the laywomen I observed seemed to have easy interactions and mutually beneficial relationships with Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇī*, partially due to being the same sex, my unexpected fieldwork findings in Mandalay indicated that they nevertheless exhibited a utilitarian tendency when attending certain types of ritual ceremonies.

On 24 August (lunar July) 2018, I attended an *ullambana* ceremony at Jingming Chan Si. In particular, I was interested in learning whether Sino-Burmese monks conducted it in accordance with the key characteristics of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Taiwan and Mainland China. Also, I wanted to observe how Sino-Burmese laypeople (most of whom were the descendants of migrant Yunnanese) practised this important ritual for their deceased relatives. Unsurprisingly, I encountered numerous lay people participating in the ceremony, in a new, larger Main Hall (Figure 12). The *ullambana* ceremony is critically important and meaningful for overseas Chinese and involves chanting sutras and offering food and donations to the monastic community (both as a meritorious act and for the consolation of their ancestors' souls), in light of their tradition of filial piety (e.g., Teiser 1988).



**Figure 12.** Numerous Yunnanese laity attentively and respectfully participating in a chanting ceremony at Jingming Chan Si. (Source: Author).

Later in the afternoon, monks and laypeople left the monastery and drove to the riverbank, where they conducted the rituals of releasing water lanterns (*Fangshuideng* 放水燈) and releasing animals (*Fangsheng* 放生). I was kindly invited by a young laywoman who had met me previously to go to these ceremonies in a car with three other women. On the way, these Sino-Burmese women chatted in Yunnanese, which I was able to understand to a certain degree. Upon hearing their praise of the day's ceremony and the monks, I asked them for further explanations. All of them passionately responded to my inquiry, and I have summarised their key viewpoints below.

In the past, many Chinese Buddhist institutions were run by Buddhist nuns, and many ceremonies were held in Jinduoyan<sup>53</sup> nunnery. However, perhaps because the abbess was so old, some laypeople felt that she no longer performed them well. In recent years, young Buddhist monks [from Shifang Guanyin Si in Yangon] came here and recommended by word of mouth by Sino-Burmese laypeople who felt that they chanted sutras sincerely and loudly, and this led to them embracing ceremonies again and participating in more of them. In other words, the monks who performed ceremonies were much very on point in comparison with nuns. As family members of the deceased, we always hope that ritual masters will perform ceremonies well for their blessing. The laity will observe monastics and then compare them.

These laywomen's statements clearly reveal the utilitarian tendency noted above, admixed with a certain degree of adoration of Chinese male monastics, who were rare in Mandalay and in Myanmar generally. In fact, Jingming Chan Si, the branch of Shifang Guanyin Si in Yangon, was established by some laypeople who preferred monks as "scarce resources". Given that Myanmar's indigenous sociocultural ethos (e.g., monks' superior status to nuns; the extinction of *bhikṣuṇīs*) affects Sino-Burmese nuns' religious identification and life to a certain degree, as discussed above, it is not surprising that Sino-Burmese laypeople are also influenced by the local ethos. Also, it is human nature that the scarcer something is, the more highly it tends to be valued. As for the concerns my carload of informants expressed about voices, we cannot deny that the physical structure of the male larynx has an advantage when it comes to chanting sutras. According to my fieldwork observations in various countries' Buddhist institutions, as well as my long-term personal ritual participation in Taiwan, monks' powerful, loud, low-pitched voices seem to attract more (female) laypeople's attention, in comparison with most nuns' softer, high-pitched ones. Numerous studies have shown how deeper low-pitched voices influence people's perceptions of professionalism and leadership (e.g., Klofstad et al. 2012; Sorokowski et al. 2019). Buddhist nuns are not expected to show authority by lowering the pitch of their voices in Buddhist ceremonies. Against this backdrop, we should not overlook how monks' chanting voices crucially impact the laity's perceptions when they participate in religious ceremonies. Moreover, my Sino-Burmese lay informants expressed above that they wanted to participate in more ceremonies due to the monks' chanting voices. These comments partially resonated with the experience of one senior volunteer who had served for more than twenty years in the reception of Puman Si, the branch of Fo Guang Shan in Taipei, who told me that some people started to believe in Buddhism after hearing Buddhist hymns. Thus, we should be careful not to underestimate the role of hymns and other religious songs in the spread of Buddhist *dharma* and the strengthening of believers' faith (e.g., Huang 2004; Lu 2007; Di 2016). Additionally, we should not overlook the fact that the *ullambana* ceremony I attended, Chinese Buddhist funeral services, and other large-scale Buddhist ceremonies such as the Water Land Liberation (*shui lu fahui* 水陸法會) and the Yogacara Offering Service, are generally led by monks, with nuns relegated to supporting roles. The justification given for this is that these ceremonies are intimately involved with death, ghosts, and/or spirits beyond the human field, which senior male monastics are allegedly more able to dominate and control.

Inspired by this new data, I decided to ask one Mandalay nun's opinion about the laity's gender preference for monks while participating in ceremonies. This key informant

nun explicitly told me that some female laypeople had a “psychological problem” (of gender preference) that led them to prefer going to monasteries over going to nunneries. She also said she knew that some of her laity attended Buddhist ceremonies at Jingming Chan Si and tried to keep it secret from her, but she did not mind because her workload was less when there were fewer laypeople around. In other words, she maintained a flexible attitude toward the laity’s gender preferences and had reconciled herself to her situation. Ven. Hongxing, on the other hand, saw the laity’s gender preference as a problem. She stressed that a real Buddhist with correct perceptions would support Buddhism regardless of whether it was propagated by nuns or monks, and indeed whether it was of a Mahāyāna or Theravāda character; and that to do otherwise is a symptom of having been blinded by external image/appearance (i.e., monastics’ sex). However, she said that in her experience, the laity’s tendency to make sharp distinctions between female and male monastics was not especially strong and that whether or not nuns received laypeople’s respect depended on the former’s individual cultivation and practice, adding that some Theravāda precept nuns won people’s respect as well.

To sum up, this section has aimed to paint a picture of the interrelationship of Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* and overseas Chinese laity in the Theravadin Burman-majority nation. Some nuns I interviewed and observed seemed to be more self-aware than others and had considerable power to arrange their religious lives and manage their nunneries or other institutions and lay followings, despite the greater challenges faced by female than male Chinese monastics in the sociocultural context of Myanmar.

## 5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to explore how Burmese sociocultural contexts affect fully ordained Chinese Mahāyāna nuns’ experiences of being part of a religious minority in a Theravādin-majority country. Specifically, it asked (1) whether these nuns’ monastic position as *bhikṣuṇīs* was recognised, or if they were thought to be merely precept nuns; (2) how Chinese Mahāyāna nuns interact with and relate to Burmese and Chinese monks in patriarchal monk-dominated contexts; and (3) what the roles of Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Sino-Burmese community are. The following is a discussion of its major findings.

With regard to the first of these points, my fieldwork data made it quite clear that most of my *bhikṣuṇī* interviewees were misapprehended as precept-nuns in the eyes of local people, chiefly due to one contextual factor, i.e., the lack of *bhikṣuṇī* lineages in Theravāda Buddhism. However, rather than taking offence at this, my informants said they focused on their own spiritual cultivation and regarded others’ perceptions of their position in the monastic hierarchy as superficialities. Furthermore, in comparison to the situation in the middle decades of the twentieth century, they appeared more likely to be recognised as monastics and to be accorded more respect by the local laity for that reason. Nevertheless, living in Theravāda-majority Myanmar, where monks’ superior status to nuns, these fully ordained Sino-Burmese nuns could not avoid either gender injustice or hostility based on their position as members of a minority sect.

Yet, even though the nuns I studied indeed seemed to occupy a position of double suffering, i.e., on both gender and ethnoreligious minority grounds, some of them—especially those who were second- and third-generation residents of Myanmar—had more interactions, better relationships, and more cross-traditional collaborations with Theravāda monks than first-generation overseas Chinese monks did in the past. This was highlighted particularly by the case of Zhonghua Si and Luohan Temple, in which the breaking down of ethnoreligious boundaries between the two Buddhist traditions was found to depend crucially on the shared use of the Burmese language.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the fact that the *gurudharma* rules (e.g., bowing to monks) and Myanmar’s socio-cultural ethos (e.g., monks’ superior status to nuns) have been significantly reinforced through the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist community’s interaction with Theravāda monks, as evidenced particularly by the seating arrangements discussed and illustrated above. My informant nuns mostly seemed to have assimilated



themselves to the local ethos of gender hierarchy and nuns' subordination to monks, i.e., followed the Burmese cultural mainstream rather than challenging or seeking to reform it. As their reason for such lack of direct action, they cited their status as minority outsiders. Instead, some Chinese nuns told me they adopted indirect strategies, such as making donations and arranging medical provision, as pathways to more interaction with Theravāda monks. This, they hoped, would eventually build mutual understanding and allow Mahāyāna Buddhism to gain more of a societal foothold, thus ensuring its long-term local survival despite the enduring antagonism between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools.

Lastly, but no less importantly, my fieldwork results demonstrate that indigenous cultural characteristics have exerted considerable influence on Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs*' relationships with the Sino-Burmese laity. While Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs*' outnumber Sino-Burmese monks, and some of the former's educational standards have also risen thanks to increased levels of lay support for Chinese nunneries in recent decades, some laywomen seem to have a gender preference for monks as 'scarce resources' when attending ceremonies, particularly ones with utilitarian aims. Notwithstanding this gender-biased context, some of the nuns I met were steadfast in their monastic mission and still played an important role in the propagation of Chinese Buddhism to the Sino-Burmese laity, as well as *saṃgha* education for the next generation of monastics. Some contemporary Sino-Burmese *bhikṣuṇīs* study abroad and return to Myanmar despite its relative unfriendliness both to female monastics and the Mahāyāna belief system, and this can be seen as in line with belief in the *bodhisattva* path.<sup>54</sup> That is, they serve the local Chinese ethnic minority's religious needs, and make contributions to potential future Chinese Mahāyāna practitioners, even though they are in Theravāda territory, where seeking to become *arhats* rather than *bodhisattvas* is normative.

While this study has foregrounded gender by focusing on migrant Chinese Mahāyāna nuns in traditionally Theravāda and patriarchal Myanmar, some further perspectives should also be discussed. For one, when Mahāyāna collides with Theravāda, sparks inevitably fly to some degree. My data suggest that, while there are visible and invisible walls separating Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* from Theravāda monk-dominated Myanmar, the cultural clash between these two Buddhist traditions nevertheless impacts Sino-Burmese nuns' religious positions and experiences of living beyond the Mahāyāna territories. The context of the Theravāda host country that these Sino-Burmese nuns have settled in also noticeably 'pushes' their spiritual cultivation beyond our expectations. Instead of fighting for liberal ideologies such as equal rights, and/or against Buddhist patriarchalism or misogyny, as many feminist scholars and some radical Taiwanese *bhikṣuṇīs* (e.g., Shih Chao-hwei)<sup>55</sup> advocate, the Sino-Burmese nuns I met practised the Buddhist wisdom and knowledge they had received through their religious life. For example, the *kṣānti paramita* 忍辱波羅蜜 means to practise patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, and endurance. While most of my Sino-Burmese informant *bhikṣuṇīs* were misapprehended as only precept nuns by local monks and laypeople, we can clearly see their endurance when it came to keeping and guarding the identity of Chinese Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇīs* tenaciously, albeit in a modest way. For example, some of my informant nuns told me that they recited the *bhikṣuṇī prātimokṣa* during the retreat period and made confession individually in front of the statue of the Buddha. These religious rituals, including *poṣadha*, *pravāraṇā* and so on, require fully ordained monastics to be implemented, and some of my informant nuns seemed to practise them chiefly as a way of maintaining their *bhikṣuṇī* identity restrainedly, instead of fighting for their "superficial" titles publicly. While these Chinese Mahāyāna monastics adopted an attitude of humility and acceptance in the face of Theravāda-majority cultural norms via a certain degree of assimilation of local customs (e.g., gender hierarchy and nuns' subordination to monks), they still maintained a sense of continuity with the key characteristics of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism rather than unconditionally localising themselves, e.g., by abandoning a lifelong vegetarian diet. To sum up, propagating Buddhism with different traditions and schools in foreign territories is quite challenging and requires a

certain degree of strategic and compromise-heavy localisation—even syncretism—while at the same time keeping to the key principles and elements of one’s own Buddhist tradition. Its success therefore crucially depends on practitioners’ own determination, training, and wisdom, and thus, their spiritual cultivation.

Lastly, but just as importantly, we cannot overlook how Sino-Burmese nuns are likely to shape the future of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in Myanmar, given that they outnumber monks, and are generally more determined and less likely to disrobe than their male counterparts, despite the latter’s ostensibly superior leadership role. Moreover, the status of Sino-Burmese female monastics will likely rise further if more and more of them are educated and trained to a similar standard to Ven. Hongxing.

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## Abbreviation

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大經. 85 vols, Edited by Junjirō Takakusu 高楠順次郎 and Kaigyoku Watanabe 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An in-depth discussion of lineage and transmission among Tibetan Buddhist nuns is beyond the scope of this paper. For overviews, see [H.-C. Shih \(2000\)](#), pp. 503–48; [Chodron \(2010\)](#), pp. 183–206; [Clarke \(2010\)](#), pp. 227–38; and [Hannah \(2012\)](#), pp. 7–44).
- <sup>2</sup> *Maechis* 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-coloured robes. On their role in Thai society, see [Seeger \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> *Thilā-shin* are religious women, like Thai *maechis*, who live in nunneries but are not ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs*. They live according to the ten precepts of a novice nun, shave their heads, and wear pink robes. On their religious standing in Burmese society, see, among others [Kawanami \(1990\)](#) and [Carbonnel \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> This article follows Mya Than’s usage of the country’s name on the grounds that “the name of the country of Burma [ . . . was] officially changed from the ‘Union of Burma’ to the ‘Union of Myanmar’ in June 1989” ([Than 1997](#), p. 116). Thus, I will use the term Burma when describing events that happened before 1989, and Myanmar for subsequent events. However, the term “Burmese” for the citizens of the country will be used in reference to all time periods, contrary to Than’s preference (*ibid.*, p. 117), but in line with local and international norms.
- <sup>5</sup> Around 3% of the population of Myanmar identifies as Sino-Burmese, a rather small proportion in comparison to other overseas-Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. However, it is worth noting that the ethnic-Chinese population in Myanmar is quite diverse and difficult to define clearly, not least due to intermarriage with other groups. For a detailed discussion, see [Roberts \(2016\)](#), pp. 6–9, 12–21.
- <sup>6</sup> As a rule, books and articles today use the *pinyin* system to transcribe Chinese names, place names, and terms. I have done the same throughout this article. Nevertheless, when referring to Taiwanese authors or masters, I have opted to use their personal romanizations as they appear on their websites, books, and articles. Overseas Chinese names and place names in Singapore and Malaysia, on the other hand, mostly utilize Hokkien romanization, and that choice has been respected here.
- <sup>7</sup> To give one typical instance, the oldest Chinese Buddhist temple in upper Burma, Amarapura Guanyin, is said to have been first built between 1773 and 1774 in Amarapura (a suburb of Mandalay) by the Yunnanese community, principally its merchants. A few Chinese monks resided in this temple after its 1838–46 reconstruction. For more details, see [Yuan \(2019\)](#), pp. 106–13 and [Li \(2015\)](#), pp. 3–4).
- <sup>8</sup> The few exceptions include a case study of Chinese Buddhism in Thailand by Kuo-Lung [Hsu \(2014\)](#), whose research examined Chinese monks’ spiritual cultivation, ritual practice, and management of Bangkok’s Bhoman-Khuraram Temple. Similarly, Guili

Lin (2013) conducted fieldwork in a Chinese monastery in Bangkok, the Mangkorn Kamalawat Temple, and compared and contrasted Chinese and Thai Buddhism in terms of temple architecture and monks' religious activities and doctrinal learning. Rewadee Ungpho (2010) explored Chinese Ceremonial Music in Mahāyāna Buddhism in Southern Thailand.

Ven. Ci-hang 慈航 is an exceptional case, having come to Yangon to establish a "Chinese Buddhist Association" (人生佛學會) for overseas laity and to promote the Ven. Taixu's *rensheng Fojiao* (人生佛教 Human Life Buddhism) from 1930 to 1935 (Kan 2019, pp. 42–51).

Specifically, this statement is based on my informants' latest estimates that more than 400 Chinese Buddhist clergy currently reside in Myanmar, but that novices account for 70% of them. I was told by one informant that it would be considered a good result if five or six young monastics were retained from among 100 novices. It is also worth noting that the number of male monastics can change quickly, due to the rapidity with which novices join monasteries and then, in most cases, disrobe. An in-depth discussion of Sino-Burmese monks' disrobing behavior is beyond the scope of this paper, but nevertheless worthy of future study.

Taiwanese nuns outnumber monks, comprising about 75 per cent (DeVido 2010, p. 120, n4). As for the Taiwanese nuns' educational background, it is rare to find a young nun whose educational level is lower than an undergraduate degree. Because of the high ratio of nuns to monks, men who choose the monastic life are more likely to be accepted. The much larger numbers of women who wish to become nuns must undergo a lengthy selection process to eliminate unsuitable candidates, ensuring a higher calibre of entrants (Jones 1999, pp. 154–55). Yu-Chen Li (2000, pp. 3–4) noted that the increasing numbers of young women with higher-education degrees choosing the monastic life were known as "the scholarly nuns" (*Xueshini* 學士尼). Indeed, as aptly put by Chün-fang Yü (2013, p. 1), "Taiwanese nuns today are highly educated and greatly outnumber monks, characteristics unprecedented in the history of Chinese Buddhism". For general studies on Taiwanese Buddhist nuns, see Chern (2000), Li (2000), Cheng (2007), DeVido (2010), and Yü (2013).

According to tradition, Mahāprajāpatī, the Buddha's aunt and stepmother, when allowed to join the Buddhist monastic community, accepted eight "fundamental rules" (*gurudharmas*) that made the nuns' order dependent upon the monks' order. For an overview of all early accounts of the founding of the order of nuns, see Anālayo (2008, pp. 105–42; 2011, pp. 268–72). For a discussion of the application of *gurudharmas* in contemporary Taiwan and Mainland China, see Heirman and Chiu (2012) and Chiu and Heirman (2014).

Nearly all of my monastic interviewees were the descendants of early overseas Chinese migrants from Yunnan, and we were able to communicate with each other in Mandarin.

Nat guilty: Monks in Myanmar Have a New Target. 2019. *The Economist*, November 16. Available online: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/11/14/monks-in-myanmar-have-a-new-target> (accessed on 1 April 2022).

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma/> (accessed 24 January 2022)

Traders from Fujian and Guangdong began travelling to Burma via sea routes before the end of the Yuan Dynasty. There was an overseas Chinese district in Rangoon (as Yangon was then known) in the mid-Qing Dynasty. Up to 90% of overseas Chinese in Lower Burma were from Fujian and Guangdong until 1931 (Chai 2006, pp. 35–6). For a detailed discussion of the history of Chinese emigration worldwide from ancient times to the present century, see Kuhn (2008).

Broadly speaking, most of the Yunnanese in Myanmar live and have always lived, in Mandalay and Upper Myanmar, whereas Yangon Chinatown has been shared since colonial times between the Hokkien and the Cantonese Chinese. My fieldwork data indicate that in recent years, more and more Yunnanese have been moving from Mandalay or Upper Myanmar to Yangon for business reasons or in search of a better life. See also Roberts (2016), p. 18.

The basic rules were compiled in India during the first centuries of Buddhism. As a result of the spread of the monastic community over the Indian subcontinent, as well as due to internal disputes over monastic regulations, several distinct codices, *Vinayas*, came into being. These codices mutually exclude each other, rendering institutional interference between one *Vinaya* tradition and another theoretically impossible. Today, three *Vinaya* traditions are still active: the Pāli tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* in Tibet, Bhutan and Mongolia, and the *Dharmaguptaka* in China and most other East Asian countries.

While the laity gives alms to both Burmese monks and *thilā-shin*, the former group receives cooked food and the latter, raw rice and money (Kawanami 1990, p. 22; Carbonnel 2009, p. 269).

The *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (*Sifen lü* 四分律T 1428) was strongly promoted by master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667 CE) and has become the main reference point for monastic discipline in Chinese Buddhism. For details, see Heirman (2002).

My data also resonates with Chialuen Chen's (2012, p. 170), that one of her informant *bhikṣuṇīs* who had spent a long time in a meditation centre in Myanmar was seen as a precept nun by most local Burmese monastics, even though the centre's leading monks respected her *bhikṣuṇī* identity.

In the same vein, it is rather difficult for Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist monastics and lay adherents in Taiwan to accept that Theravāda monks eat meat, which is one of the key obstacles to the development of Theravāda Buddhism there (Chen 2012, pp. 168, 170, 177), as abstaining from all meat and fish all one's life has become a major characteristic of the Chinese monastic tradition (Chiu 2015).

Ven. Leguan 樂觀 (1902–1987) was a monk well-known for his protection of the nation and defense of Buddhism. During the War of Resistance against Japan, he appealed for monastics to form a Rescue Crew of Monks to provide medical services to injured

soldiers. He has written several works regarding Buddhism and political issues around national defense. Ven. Leguan also conducted some anti-communist-themed religious activities in Yangon after the PRC government's takeover of Mainland China in 1949.

It is worth noting that respecting Chinese Mahāyāna monastics is one thing, but believing in their version of Buddhism is quite another. Myanmar's population of lay Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists is quite low in comparison with its Theravāda counterpart, and my fieldwork observations in Myanmar suggest that Chinese Buddhist monasteries' major lay supporters are drawn mostly from the less-desinicized Yunnanese group, rather than the Burmese-ized Hokkien or Cantonese ones, or Burmese people. Theravāda Buddhism is integrated into most Hokkiens' social lives and serves as a key mechanism for their social acceptance (Duan 2015, pp. 58–64; see also Chai 2006, pp. 65–69).

However, we cannot overlook the fact that those Buddhist nuns receiving the full ordination with legitimacy and religious status in Mahāyāna countries may still have gendered experiences of subordination to monks traditionally, institutionally and socially, even if such experiences may be less frequent or less severe than those of *thilā-shin* in Myanmar, *maechi* in Thailand, or eight/ten-precept nuns in Sri Lanka.

Hinayāna literally means the lesser vehicle 小乘, a derogatory term used by Mahāyāna Buddhists; see Keown (2003, p. 107).

According to the *Foguang dacidian* (1988, p. 6691), the Buddha dictates that monastic members should not consume food after midday. However, an evening meal is regularly served in Chan monasteries and it is euphemistically called "medicine stone" 藥石, i.e., the food is deemed to be curative of the frailty of the body, rather than nourishment in the ordinary sense. Similarly, the *bhikṣus* of the Thai Forest tradition eat plain dark chocolate and consider it to be medicine.

For more information on this issue, see Chiu (2020, pp. 235–45).

Burmese monks or novices have been widely assumed to strictly fast after midday, but some of them do not do so, according to my fieldwork observations and other data. For example, I have personally observed that a few Theravāda monks openly went to restaurants close to the Shwedagon Pagoda for dinner, or visited coffee shops there to watch sport in the evening on TV. To my surprise, other people eating or drinking inside restaurants or coffee shops with those monks seem to have become accustomed to these monks' behaviors, and showed no reactions. My informant monks and nuns also told me that Burmese masters tacitly allowed their novices to eat food at all times of day, out of health concerns. This may burst some people's bubbles regarding the strictness of Theravāda Buddhists' fasting, but importantly, it also reveals a degree of cross-traditional communication about this sensitive topic. An in-depth discussion of how often Burmese monks break the rule of fasting after midday is beyond the scope of this article, but future study into their fellow monks' and laypeople's justifications for such rule breaking is clearly warranted.

Another important example is provided by the abbot of the Amarapura Guanyin Temple in Mandalay 洞繆觀音寺, who has cooperated with Burmese monks in providing education to poor local children and teenagers via the Free Monastic Middle School of Maha Gandhayon Monastery.

These centres differed in quality depending on each monastery's financial condition and educational arrangements. The ordained monks or nuns, usually numbering just one or two, served in the capacity of these novices' parents or teachers: raising and educating them in the hope that they would continue the Chinese Mahāyāna lineage in Myanmar.

Ciguang Si has organized annual *sangha* offerings in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Detailed reports on these Buddhist activities are available at <http://www.sanghadana.com/edcontent.php?lang=tw&tb=8&id=504> (accessed 16 November 2021).

However, it is also worth considering why Mahāyāna Buddhists' offerings to their Theravāda counterparts are a one-way flow; i.e., one seldom hears of any Theravāda group reciprocating such actions.

A similar seating arrangement for Buddhist nuns could also be seen when the United Association of Humanistic Buddhism of Chunghua organized a three-day meeting in Myanmar (15–17 February 2017) regarding harmony and dialogue between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism. A photo and description of this event can be found at <http://www.lnanews.com/news/48/%E5%85%A9%E5%B2%B8%E5%8D%97%E5%8C%97%E5%82%B3%E4%BD%9B%E6%95%99%E8%9E%8D%E5%90%88%E4%BA%A4%E6%B5%81%E3%80%80%E9%A6%96%E8%A8%AA%E7%B7%AC%E7%94%B8.html> (accessed 18 November 2021).

We cannot overlook the fact that Buddhist monks' general superiority over nuns during rituals and nuns' bowing practices also exists in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, particularly in Mainland China. Such discussion is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. See for example Qin (2000); Chiu and Heirman (2014); and Péronnet (2020).

In comparison with other Buddhist cultures in Asian countries, gender equality fares relatively better in Taiwan even though Taiwanese Buddhism is not free from institutional androcentrism and sexism. Devido comments that Taiwan is reported as the "heaven" for *bhikṣuṇīs* because it "is a free and open space for Buddhist nuns' development" (DeVido 2010, p. 7). For the issue of gender and Buddhism in Taiwan, see for instance Cheng (2007); Schak (2008); Heirman and Chiu (2012); Hu (2016); and Lee and Han (2016).

The action of prostration is a complex Buddhist practice in Myanmar and beyond the scope of this paper. For a general discussion, see Kyaw (2018).

Ven. Guang Qin 廣欽 (1892–1986), a well-known Buddhist monk in Taiwan, was an ascetic who is said to never have lain down to sleep. Many stories are told about his supernatural powers: people called him the "fruit-eating monk" because he ate no other kind of food when he practiced meditation and spiritual cultivation in the mountainous wilderness. See Shi (1994).



That is, monks and nuns worshipping and working in the same premises. Despite the dual *saṃgha* being a key feature of Taiwanese Buddhism due to the historical circumstances, it is worth noting that all dual monasteries have regulations about sex segregation and appropriate conduct, relationships, and interactions, as a means of maintaining celibacy. According to my fieldwork observations and other data, the dual *saṃghas* of Dharma Drum Mountain and Foguangshan both stress the distance between monks and nuns and the appropriateness of their interactions. For similar descriptions of monks and nuns living in separate accommodation, see Chandler (2004, p. 183); Cheng (2007, p. 154); and DeVido (2010, pp. 121–22, n5).

Some of my informants told me that talented adult monks or nuns who are motivated to stay in monastic circles are often sent to Taiwan, Singapore, or Mainland China for advanced monastic education and that some of them never return to Myanmar and/or resume secular lives.

It is worth noting that in today's Sino-Burmese Buddhist community, there is a generation gap, amounting perhaps to inter-generational conflict, between middle-aged monastics who have studied abroad, and older ones who received only traditional mentorship.

After Burma achieved independence, its government adopted foreign-exchange controls, and this greatly impacted overseas remittances to China. Its ethnic-Chinese community at that time, therefore, began to seek out overseas Chinese migrant monks and perform Buddhist ceremonies for the liberation of community members' deceased parents (L. Shih 1977, pp. 144–45, 158). Eventually, therefore, Myanmar's economic policies reshaped its Chinese Buddhist monasteries into a system chiefly concerned with funeral-ritual services for Chinese immigrants.

Other *dharma* services and rituals provided by most Chinese Buddhist temples there are the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Dharma Service (celebration of Guan Yin's Birthday, Leaving Home and Enlightenment); the Venerable God Shakra's Birthday 帝釋天尊聖誕; the Celebration of Shakyamuni Buddha's Birthday; the Celebration of *Ullambana*; and the Anniversary of Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment, among others.

In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, laypeople go to Buddhist monasteries, worship the Buddha, chant sutras, and donate offerings to monastics for merits and blessings on the first and fifteenth days of every lunar month. According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* 地藏經 "[O]n the first, eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, eighteenth, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth days of the lunar month [ . . . if laymen] are able to recite this Sutra once on those ten vegetarian days, before the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, or worthy ones and sages, then no disasters will occur within a radius of one hundred yojanas around them" (T13.n412, p783b25–p0783c03). The above translations are quoted from the website of The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, available at <http://www.cttbusa.org/ess/earthstore6.htm> (accessed 22 December 2021).

While it is common to see Chinese words written and displayed inside Chinese monasteries and nunneries as private spaces, I was told that, in Yangon, it has been forbidden for shops to have Chinese signboards on the street in public spaces due to the government policy since the start of the Ni Wen regime.

Unlike the overseas Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia, or Thailand, the Sino-Burmese of Myanmar have faced an array of challenges and difficulties throughout their history, including the policy of Burmanization, isolationism, and even active exclusion of ethnic-Chinese people. For discussions of anti-Chinese riots, the Sino-Burmese political position, and citizenship in Myanmar, see for example Li (2015, pp. 17–25; 2017, pp. 179–219), Ho and Chua (2016, pp. 896–916), Fan (2006, pp. 47–72), and Than (1997, pp. 115–46).

Some of the Chinese monasteries I visited there have hired local Burmese to organise temple affairs.

Jack Meng-Tat Chia (2020, p. 21) pointed out that it is quite common for overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to have "unity of the three teachings" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

We should not overlook how local Buddhist contexts may have influenced this way of thinking. For example, Ying Duan (2015, p. 66) pointed out that the "localized Chinese" he researched utilised some Buddhist terms and Buddhist philosophy to deal with the challenges and difficulties they confronted while living in Myanmar.

It is worth noting that this utilitarian tendency is also quite common among Burmese Buddhists, considered as representative of the primary ethos of practice in Myanmar. For example, Burmese laypeople offer *dāna* as religious practice to monastic communities for merit-making in order to have a good rebirth next life (Kawanami 2020, pp. 36–40).

A young Burmanized Hokkien man who had been strongly assimilated into Burmese society told me that Burmese laypeople's knowledge of the Pāli canon was deficient and that this was because they thought knowing it was a monks' job, not theirs.

Some famous and holy masters, including Ven. Xuyun 虛雲, Ven. Miao-Shan 妙善, and Ven. Ci-hang 慈航 stayed in Yangon between the late 1890s and the early 1930s. While Ven. Ci-hang established a "Chinese Buddhist Association" for overseas laity from 1930 to 1935 in Yangon, he did not stay in Myanmar permanently, and in the end moved to Taiwan, establishing the first Buddhist college there after the end of the Chinese Civil War (Kan 1996, pp. 87–127).

In fact, there are four other Buddhist institutions in the Mandalay area at which the laity can participate in ceremonies.

In fact, the dissemination of Theravāda Buddhism in Mainland China has been an important development in Chinese Buddhism since the turn of this century. More and more Chinese monks and nuns visit, study, and attend short-term or intensive meditation retreats of Theravāda monasteries in Thailand and Myanmar, as that tradition is deemed to be closer to "original Buddhism"



and, as such, capable of bringing greater rigorousness to monasticism. For an overview, see Bianchi (2001, forthcoming) and Lau (2022).

- 55 Shih Chao-hwei 釋昭慧 was born in Myanmar in 1957 and later moved to Taiwan in 1965. She was ordained as a Buddhist nun in 1980, and in 1988 became a public figure as a Buddhist radical activist, leading various social protests related to various issues such as human rights, animal rights, and environmental protection. For a detailed introduction, see DeVido (2010, pp. 102–10).

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