

Article

Rethinking Gender and Female Laity in Late Imperial Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Biographies

Xing Wang

History Faculty, Fudan University, Shanghai 200434, China; xingwang@fudan.edu.cn

Abstract: This paper explores how lay female believers are depicted in the Chinese monastic Pure Land Buddhist texts and how a particular late-imperial Chinese Buddhist biography collection betrayed the previously existing narrative of female laity. Moreover, I wish to show that there had existed a long-lasting and persistent non-binary narrative of lay women in Chinese Pure Land biographies admiring female agency, in which female Pure Land practitioners are depicted as equally accomplished to male ones. Such a narrative betrays the medieval monastic elitist discourse of seeing women as naturally corrupted. This narrative is best manifested in the late Ming monk master Yunqi Zhuhong's collection, who celebrated lay female practitioners' religious achievement as comparable to men. This tradition is discontinued in the Confucian scholar Peng Shaosheng's collection of lay female Buddhist biographies in the Qing dynasty, however, in which Peng depicts women as submissive and inferior to males. This transition—from using the stories of eminent lay female Buddhists to challenge Confucian teachings to positioning lay females under Confucian disciplines—exhibits Peng Shaosheng's own invention, rather than a transmission of the inherited formulaic narration of lay female believers, as he claimed.

**Citation:** Wang, Xing. 2021.Rethinking Gender and Female Laity in Late Imperial Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Biographies. *Religions* 12: 705. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090705>

Academic Editor: Mario Poceski

Received: 17 August 2021

Accepted: 27 August 2021

Published: 31 August 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: lay female; Pure Land Buddhism; Peng Shaosheng; Yunqi Zhuhong

1. Introduction

The pursuit of reincarnation in Amitābha's (*Ami tuofo* 阿彌陀佛) Western Pure Land of Bliss (*Sukhavati*; *xifang jile shijie* 西方極樂世界 or *anyang guo* 安養國) is the root of one of the longest-lasting and most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, both in China and in East Asian societies more widely. Inspired by translated Buddhist scriptures describing the magnificent environment of the Pure Land of Bliss and Amitābha's sacred vows promising any sentient being reincarnation in his pure realm, Chinese monastic and lay Buddhists from the Western Jin dynasty (265–317 CE) forward started to follow this so-called “easy” and “convenient” religious ideal. According to their interpretation of these texts, such as *The Buddha Speaks of the Infinite Life Sūtra* (or *The Longer Sukhāvātīyā Sūtra*; *Wuliang shou jing* 無量壽經) and *Amitāyus Visual Meditation Sūtra* (*Guan wuliang shou jing* 觀無量壽經), Amitābha's promise offered a path to attaining Buddhahood with no possibility of failure. Chinese Buddhists spontaneously or collectively practiced the “Buddha name recitation” or “Buddha name repetition” meditation, *nianfo* 念佛, in hopes of successful rebirth in the Pure Land after their death in this so-called *Sahā*, or mundane, world of affliction and impurity (Tsukamoto 1976, pp. 3–35; Jones 2019, pp. 54–72).¹ From the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) onward, the theories and doctrines of Pure Land Buddhism were drastically complicated and expanded by eminent elite monks; these developments also came about due to the popularity of its practice in medieval China (Liu 2000, pp. 194–370).

During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), the first work in the genre of Pure Land Reincarnation Biographies (*wangsheng ji* 往生集) appeared. This medieval Chinese Pure Land genre later became one of the most popular and extensive types of Buddhist historiographic texts during the Song (960–1279 CE), Ming (1368–1644 CE), and Qing (1636–1912 CE) dynasties, when Buddhism as an intellectual and social institution is believed by some

scholars to be transformed into a more secular and state-controlled religion in China (Chen 2019; Zhou 2014). From the late Ming to mid-Qing period, Pure Land biographies were composed by both elite monks and literati to spread Pure Land doctrines and reinforce certain religious ideals. Moreover, other kinds of Buddhist biographies—or, more precisely, hagiographies and miraculous stories—also proliferated widely. Many of these latter types of biographies overlap with Pure Land biographies in terms of their themes and textual structure.

Among various new narrative thematic features appearing in the Song dynasty, including new biographic genres like Buddhist hagiographic and miraculous texts, biographies from the Song onward also start to show more interest in female Buddhist practitioners and, in particular, lay females. One mid-Qing Buddhist hagiographic collection compiled by a lay male Buddhist scholar Peng Shaosheng 彭紹昇 (1740–1796 CE)—*Biographies of Good Women* (*Shan nüren zhuan* 善女人傳)—is often seen as the most representative example of the Chinese Buddhist community's burgeoning interest in lay female Buddhist religiosity; in fact, it is the only biographic collection exclusively dedicated to lay women. As a lay female Buddhist hagiography, a Pure Land biography, and a collection of miraculous stories of these female figures in history, this biographic collection contains rich information about lay female Buddhists' religious lives and the compiler's construction of exemplary lay female images. Recent research on gender conceptions in the *Biographies of Good Women* interprets this collection as an example of a Confucian androcentric construction of idealistic lay females, one which mediates between certain Confucian gender disciplines and Pure Land Buddhist perceptions of female inferiority (Lo 2013; Wu 2013, pp. 43–48).

At a glance, one may conclude that Peng's androcentric narrative accords both with Confucian gender norms and with certain misogynistic elements in Chinese Buddhism; one may even take Peng's narrative as representative of, and contributing to, an existing construction of gendered laity identity in the late imperial Chinese Pure Land context. In this article, however, I argue that Peng's narrative strategy in biographing lay female Buddhists, particularly Pure Land practitioners, is his personal invention rather than a continuation of tradition. Although Peng claimed to be the spiritual heir of an earlier late-Ming period Pure Land patriarch, Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535–1615 CE), Peng's depiction of Buddhist female laity opposes Zhuhong's construction and his view of gender. This research shows that there existed before the Qing dynasty there had been a shared and continuing tradition of celebrating lay women's independence from, and challenge to, gender stereotypes and duality in contrast to medieval elite Chinese Buddhist doctrines on gender. Moreover, in Zhuhong's narrative this tradition is furthered and directed exactly toward combatting the existing secular gender dichotomy. I wish to further exhibit Peng's twist of Zhuhong's gender perspective and show how Peng's twist separates him from the earlier monastic Pure Land views on female laity.

2. Androcentrism in a Buddhist Context

Ruether ([1987] 2005) defines “androcentrism” in a general religious context as “cultural perspectives where the male is generically taken to be the norm of humanness (p. 334)”. Androcentrism further “translates the dialectics of human existence—superiority/inferiority . . . active/passive . . . and so forth—into androcentric gender symbolism (p. 334)”. In other words, any religious rationale that constructs women's image as part of a gender dichotomy or gender hierarchy may contain an androcentric connotation. This hierarchical gender view in religions is usually accompanied by a misogynistic narrative that defines the female gender as religiously inferior, corrupted, and even excluded from the possibility of religious salvation (Ruether 1983, pp. 72–92). Critics of this androcentric rationale have understood the male-dominant way of thinking as opposed to female empowerment. In these critics' view, then, both women's femininity and resistance to feminine gender roles should be celebrated as demonstrating women's independence and equality to males (Moitra 2002, pp. 6–29). In terms of Christian hagiographic writings, the androcentric view has certainly become an issue for academic discussion. Caroline

Bynum Walker (1991, pp. 43–49) has pointed out that hagiographic literature in Middle Ages Europe (roughly 500–1500 CE) often depicts female saints in flat and monotonous images and depicts their religious experiences as confined in their daily secular life, whereas male saints' stories are narrated in diverse and methodological manners; the men's religious experiences, moreover, involve constant transgression of different socio-religious boundaries.

This issue of androcentric narratives in religion has also been noticed by recent scholars of Buddhist studies. Alan Sponberg (1992, p. 8) concludes that in early Indian Buddhist texts attitudes toward women contain three inter-related aspects: "soteriological inclusiveness; institutional androcentrism; [and] ascetic misogyny." This indicates that, although women are purportedly considered equal to men in the path of enlightenment in an early Buddhist context, women are actually hierarchically inferior and defiled. They are thus excluded from certain religious achievements. Being born a woman is also considered a result of bad karma. As women are additionally understood as naturally lacking wisdom, in certain later developments of Indian Buddhist texts women are represented as incapable of becoming Buddhas (Anālayo 2009). This is a doctrine that early Chinese Buddhism took on fervently and developed, possibly under Confucian influences, in order to construct women as physically and mentally obstructed and incapable of attaining Buddhahood (Kajiyama 1982). In the famous Tang Buddhist encyclopedia *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林), a chapter called "The Department of Lay Women" (*Sunübu* 俗女部) is dedicated solely to the doctrines on lay female Buddhists. In this chapter the compiler presented a conspicuously negative attitude toward women, saying that:

Lay women are poisoned and full of faults, and Buddha said [their] wickedness is worse than males ... [if one] gets intimate with [women, then his] country will perish and [his] family will collapse. [If one] touches [women] then it is like holding a viper. [Women's] words on the outside are like honey, but [their] inner heart is toxic. Poverty in the family is brought by women. Death on a journey is brought by women. Grudges at home are brought by women. Sons' and daughters' betrayals are brought by women ... The inability of rebirth as humans and celestial deities is brought by women. The obstacles to the path of good karma are brought by women. The inability to attain the fruit of awakening is brought by women. Faults [of women] as such are impossible to discuss in detail. Sentient beings like this are worth [Buddha's] mercy. [They] are often burnt by the flame of desire and cannot break [themselves] away, [and as a result they] suffer from endless afflictions.

夫在家俗女患毒多過，佛說邪諂甚於男子 ... 近則失國破家，觸則如把毒蛇。外言如蜜，內心如鴆。家貧困苦，皆由女人。出外喪身，亦由女人。室家不和，亦由女人。男女反逆，亦由女人 ... 不生人天，亦由女人。障善業道，亦由女人。不入聖果，亦由女人。如是過患不可具論。衆生如是甚為可愍，常為慾火所燒而不能離，致受殃苦爾來不絕也。(T53, pp. 443c23–444a11)

This is perhaps one of the earliest indigenous Chinese male Buddhist elites' comments on the role of women, especially lay women. A clearly androcentric and misogynistic statement—that male Buddhists should avoid any direct contact with women—sets the basic tone for this chapter. Whether this is the compiler's own voice or not is questionable, since this collection contains many contradictory themes. However, this statement at least shows an elitist and monastic perspective on women based on a long-lasting development of a Chinese Buddhist androcentric perspective before the Tang dynasty. Similarly, early Chinese Pure Land discourse also addresses the issue of women's exclusion based on the translated scriptures, in which the female body is considered defiled and therefore excluded from the Pure Land; a transformation of the female body into a transcendental Great Man (*da zhangfu* 大丈夫) is required for women to access it (Harrison 1998). In one of the first systematic Pure Land essays written in China, Tangluan's 曇鸞 (476–542 CE) *Annotations to the Article of Pure Land Rebirth* (*Wangsheng lunzhu* 往生論註), the author not only reiterated the doctrine of "no women in the Pure Land," but also extended the concept

of womanhood to a kind of psychological status of “obsequiousness and weakness [諂曲或復懦弱]” in both genders (T40, p. 831a18–19). In this sense, not only the female body is excluded in the Pure Land; allegedly “feminine” mental qualities are also denied. One may see this as a stigmatization of femininity and womanhood and an oversimplification of the complex relationship between gender, sex, and gender-specific mentalities. At least based on textual representations, an androcentric doctrine is clearly subsumed into Chinese Pure Land discourse.

However, this androcentric gender discourse was not fully inherited in later monastic writings without any adjustment. One may even argue that the misogynistic Pure Land doctrine could have been a specific medieval Chinese invention rather than a view explicitly expressed in Indian texts, and this doctrine in China was not unanimously followed by monastic and lay Buddhist elites (Harrison 1998). The famous Chan and Pure Land master during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms-early Song period Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽 (904–975CE) claimed that both men and women possess Buddha nature (*foxing* 佛性) and are capable of attaining Buddhahood based on his understanding of the Chinese version of Tathāgatagarbha (*rulaizang* 如來藏) doctrine (T 48, p. 559b). Yongming Yanshou even proposed that for an enlightened Bodhisattva, femininity can be transformed into the heart of great compassion, which is regarded as a superior quality of the enlightened that is not seen among ordinary beings:

The heart of great compassion is humble and adaptive to the external world. Its nature is soft and meek; it accords with things and does not violate. Therefore [the heart of great compassion] resembles [the great qualities of] women.

慈悲之心，虛而外適。其性柔弱，隨物不違，故如女也。(T 48, p. 559c19–20)

Here, unlike the passage in *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma*, femininity is celebrated as an important aspect of an enlightened heart equal to masculinity rather than denounced. Ding-wa E. Hsieh (2002, pp. 166–71) argues that during the Song dynasty, monastic male Chan Buddhist writings, especially Chan biographies, started to focus more on women’s spiritual and religious accomplishment; they tried to reconcile the tension between misogynistic Chinese Buddhist doctrines and the gender equality in attaining Buddhahood celebrated in Chinese Tathāgatagarbha teachings. Therefore, it is important for us to realize that certain non-binary gender narratives co-existed with androcentric doctrines in Chinese Buddhist texts. Chan literature is not the only kind of writing popularizing positive images of female Buddhist practitioners. As we shall see, monastic Pure Land biographies of lay women in China before Qing dynasty do not follow an androcentric discourse as well and advocate a non-binary gender image in return. Later in Zhuhong’s discussion of women’s rebirth in the Pure Land we will see that he also disagreed with the simplistic binary gender view which only read the “no women” doctrine in Pure Land texts literally. It was in Peng Shaosheng’s writing that the androcentric Buddhist doctrine is reiterated as the guideline for the construction of ideal lay female Buddhists.

3. Peng Shaosheng in a Late Imperial Chinese Gender Context

Beyond a Buddhist gender perspective, scholarly interpretations of Peng Shaosheng’s androcentric attitude toward gender are usually based on two factors: one is his identity as both Confucian scholar and Pure Land Buddhist, the other is the way women are represented in the *Biographies of Good Women* (Lo 2013; Wu 2020). Although in this paper I do not intend to discuss in depth the relationship between Peng Shaosheng’s Buddhist gender views and his Confucian thoughts but only wish to show how Peng manipulated previous monastic gender narratives, it is worth noticing that previous scholars have established an understanding of Peng’s Buddhist biographies in terms of his Confucian propositions. There is an underlying context that a normative, binary, and even misogynistic understanding of gender had gradually come into being since the Song. New interpretations of Confucian classics and constructions of new Confucian intellectual frameworks from Song to Qing are often concluded by contemporary Western scholars as a new type of Confucian tradition “Neo-Confucianism” (de Bary 1993). Although this term does not and could not

fully describe the complex, polemic and diverse developments of new Confucian thoughts and practices from the Song onwards, it still indicates certain shared features, debates, concepts in this long transformation of Confucian thoughts from Song to Qing (Makeham 2010, pp. x–xiv), and one of a shared debate is the division of gender. Perhaps it is wrong to label all new gender discourses from Song to Qing as “Neo-Confucian”, but some ideas about and disciplines to women proposed by Confucian literati during this long period are indeed rooted in the reinterpretation of Confucian classics.² In the well-known Song Confucian master Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200CE) work on familial morality and domestic ethics the *Minor Study* (*Xiaoxue* 小學), he constantly used sayings in Confucian Classics to stress on the importance of gender division and female inferiority (Wang 2017). He even believed that it is women’s nature to be soft and docile in contrast to men, and gender relationship naturally resembles that of a king and his subordinate officials (Zhu [1782] 1982, p. 19). From the Song dynasty onward women’s role in theory and in popular religious and ritual practices became more restricted and inferior, in tandem with a rising Confucian emphasis on gender divisions and restrictions on women’s social roles (Overmyer 1981, pp. 106–9). Yet new Confucian gender duality also received criticisms. Certain male Confucian masters’ hierarchical and normative understandings of gender may have gained authoritative positions on an official level in later Song, Ming, and early Qing periods, but in practice there had always been doubts and criticisms. In the field of medicine and Daoist Inner Alchemy practice during the Ming and Qing dynasties, physicians and theorists already challenged the hierarchical and dichotomous view of gender. These practitioners advocated a non-binary gender balance and even the transcendence of gender (Furth 1999, pp. 134–54; Valussi 2008).³ This demonstrates that admitting the ostensive gender differences does not necessarily lead to the absolution or perpetuation of them.

Moreover, lay female Buddhism was a field that filled the void of Confucian intervention in domestic spaces, and in many cases proves lay women’s own agency in male-dominant narratives, which evoked discontent among male Confucian scholars (Ebrey 1993, p. 124; Mann 1997, pp. 194–98). Xu Man (Xu 2016, pp. 205–6) concludes in her discussion of female religion in Song dynasty’s Fujian province that we cannot simply regard some accounts in male literati’s writings of female religion at that time as only manifesting Confucian discipline or suppression of women. Rather, in a lot of scenarios religion as both an assemblage of personal beliefs and a social institution allowed women to exhibit their agency and gender identity and even to transgress domestic boundaries. Consequently, many women’s religious choices and practices were not that distinct from monastic and male traditions. Beata Grant (2008) points out that in Qing period China male Chan Buddhist patriarchs’ and lay male writers’ accounts of accomplished lay female figures, which include descriptions of their devotion to domestic life and their choice to retreat to the personal inner space, are often compared to monastic figures obeying monastic rules and precepts rather than deemed as catering to Confucian gender divisions. Further, these lay women’s heroic actions are celebrated in light of ideal male Buddhists rather than being seen as violations of Confucian divisions. However, some conservative Confucian voices saw lay female religiosity as a challenge to Confucian gender morality; during the Ming and Qing dynasties, during which certain forms of Confucian ideology still existed as a dominant ideological and ethical power, campaigns for the promotion of submissive female social roles were still a significant part of the government’s and male literati’s concerns (Mann 1997, p. 23; Rowe 1998).

It is against this intellectual as well as religious conflict between new Confucian gender morality and lay female Buddhism that Peng Shaosheng determined to reconcile the two. Wu Hongyu’s (Wu 2013, pp. 10–47) pioneering study on Peng Shaosheng’s *Biographies of Good Women* already shows that Peng held a half-Confucian, half-Buddhist perspective on female laity, one that is potentially androcentric in the Confucian sense and a reaction to his Confucian detractors. Wu’s evidence can be divided into three aspects: one is that the issues of filial piety, chastity, and familial duty are highlighted in Peng’s editing of the stories; the second is that in the depiction of miracles related to lay females Peng’s collection often

makes them recipients or witnesses, rather than active performers, of Buddhist miracles; the third aspect is that stories of successful rebirth in the Pure Land echo the popular belief of karmic retribution in late imperial China, which again encourages proper female behaviors according to certain social norms. Wu (2013, pp. 22–40) and Lo (2013) have already pointed out that far from purely dedicating himself to Pure Land Buddhism, Peng Shaosheng had no intention of setting aside his Confucian pursuits. He wished to reconcile Buddhism and new Confucian teachings as compatible with each other. Born in a local Confucian literati family in Changzhou 長洲 (today's Suzhou) in Jiangsu province, Peng initially dedicated himself to the study of late imperial Confucian philosophy and turned to Pure Land Buddhism at the age of twenty-nine.

After his conversion to Buddhism he was still known for his syncretic attitude towards Confucianism and Buddhism, and Peng often proselytized Pure Land doctrines to Confucian literati.⁴ In his own autobiography—included in another of his collections, the *Biographies of Buddhist Laymen* (*Jushi zhuan* 居士傳)—Peng attempted to defend Buddhism as not violating but coexisting with Confucian family norms (Shek 1993, pp. 100–6). In the preface of the *Biographies of Buddhist Laymen* Peng strongly criticized those Confucian literati in history who attacked Buddhism and saw Buddhism and Confucianism as contradictory; Peng claimed that those historical debates between Buddhists and Confucianists were initiated by a kind of ignorance to the possibility that Buddhism and Confucianism are actually compatible with each other (X88, p. 180b). As scholars have shown, Peng's defense of Buddhism against Confucian literati who did not share his faith and his mediation between Buddhism and the Ming-Qing period Confucian teachings all aimed to respond to complex Confucian challenges to Buddhism, and Peng tried to integrate certain Qing Confucian discourse on ethics with Buddhist doctrines in his writing (Liang 2001; Qian 2020). Therefore, Peng proposed the synthesis of Buddhism and Confucian thought in order to both proselytize to different Confucian scholars and answer Confucian critiques. This intention is reflected in Peng's Buddhist biographic collections. Women's chastity and filial piety become an important theme in *Biographies of Good Women* for Peng's agenda of "Educating Women" (*nüjiao* 女教) in a Confucian sense (Li 2017, p. 188). As we shall see, Peng's tone in his collection of lay female Buddhist biographies shows his systematic modification of the style in which these stories were narrated in order to fit the story into his semi-Confucian, semi-Buddhist gender discourse.

4. Pure Land Biographies before the Ming Dynasty and Narratives of Lay Women

Christoph Kleine (1998) argues that Chinese and Japanese Pure Land biographies fall into the category of Buddhist "hagiography" not because they initiated a cult of saints in the Christian sense, but because these texts edify Pure Land teachings to their readers and set up images of exemplary figures and mediators between readers and Pure Land ideals. He also argues that in their depictions of lay female practitioners women are understood as equals to males and the possibility of women attaining salvation is highlighted. This means that, in this monastic tradition, the androcentric connotation in doctrine is weakened. I believe that this point could be developed further; in records of lay female Pure Land practitioners before the Ming dynasty, lay females are not only depicted as equals to men; certain narratives also show a non-binary standing point trying to blur gender boundaries. Here, "non-binary" refers to a gender narrative in which men and women are presented as equally capable of achieving reincarnation in the Pure Land, and that women are not religiously inferior to men. There are even stories celebrating female superiority in a Pure Land context that challenges the doctrinal understanding of womanhood. This monastic tradition, as we shall see, does not conform to the androcentric Buddhist doctrine as mentioned before.

Peng's collection includes many stories from biographies in history, and the sources of Peng's stories vary in terms of their narratives, standpoints, and historical contexts. Stories of successful Buddhist practitioners in China reincarnated in Amitābha's Pure Land of Bliss date back to the Western Jin dynasty and early records show strong laity

backgrounds of these Pure Land practitioners, in contrast to later monastic practitioners recorded in various eminent monk biographies (Liu 2000, p. 10). The famous Pure Land “patriarch” Huiyuan 慧遠 of Mount Lu was the legendary leader of the first Chinese Pure Land society. According to legend, in this society monastic and lay practitioners joined together to practice *nianfo* meditation for the purpose of attaining reincarnation in the Pure Land, though arguably the sectarian tradition of the Pure Land had not been established at that time (Jones 2019, pp. 193–216). These early records of Pure Land practices were scattered in different kinds of Chinese Buddhist archives, however, and it is not until the Tang dynasty (618–907CE) that we first begin to see biographic collections dedicated solely to Amitābha’s Pure Land belief. Ogasawara Senshu (Ogasawara 1951) points out that the first deliberate collection of biographies on personages with successful rebirth in the Pure Land is the chapter “Citations of [Stories] of the Appearances of Contemporary Figures Reborn [in the Pure Land]” (*Yin xiande wangsheng ren xiangmao* 引現得往生人相貌) in a famous mid-Tang period Pure Land monastic patriarch⁵ Jiakai’s 迦才 work *On the Pure Land* (*Jingtu lun* 淨土論). In this chapter, Jiakai recorded stories of six monks, five nuns, five lay male Buddhists (*Upāsaka*; *you po sai* 優婆塞) and five lay female Buddhists (*Upāsikā*; *you po yi* 優婆夷) (T47, pp. 97a–100a).

Lay females are put last of the four groups in Jiakai’s narrative. Details of the five Sui and Tang period lay female Pure Land practitioners’ family lives and gender-relations with their husbands and male relatives are obscure. In fact, their industrious religious practices are described in a manner not significantly different from those of lay males. In the story of the “Blind Old Mother” (*Mang laomu* 盲老母), the anonymous blind female practitioner’s body was consecrated and put into a stūpa—a Buddhist burial structure—like monks and nuns, and her stūpa was worshiped by people in her village (T47, p. 99c). In Jiakai’s view, then, accomplished female practitioners are clearly comparable to males and even monastic Buddhists. Jiakai’s narrative here contrasts both with the doctrine of “no women” in the Pure Land as stated in the Chinese scriptures, and with a misogynistic view seen in many Tang period Buddhist texts.

Later in *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma* a section is dedicated to Pure Land biographies, in the chapter worshipping Amitābha (T53, pp. 399c–401c). In this section, two stories about lay female practitioners are recounted; their particular gender narratives deserve our attention. In the story of the wife of Ge Jizhi 葛濟之, Lady Ji 紀氏, the lady is described both as a good wife exemplary of secular womanly virtue (*shenyou fude* 甚有婦德) but also as an accomplished and pious Buddhist who also practiced certain “celestial techniques” (*xianfa* 仙法) with her husband (T53, p. 399c28).⁶ Because of Lady Ji’s pious belief and constant practice, a miraculous vision of Amitābha, Bodhisattvas, and mysterious light appeared to her one day in the sky. Many people in her village also witnessed this miraculous vision and thereupon converted to Buddhism. In this story Lady Ji’s image is constructed as that of an ideal wife while at the same time a charismatic religious “master”, and no description is given to show her secular achievement; the text only exhibits her outstanding religious accomplishment as a performer of miracles.

Another story tells the experience of lay male Buddhist Wei Shizi’s 魏世子 pious daughter during the Northern and Southern dynasties period (420–589 CE). After long Buddhist practice since childhood, she died at the age of fourteen and was resurrected to report her successful rebirth in the Pure Land of Bliss (T53, p. 400b). The daughter claimed that after her death she was reborn in the Pure Land and saw that the lotus seeds of her father Wei and her pious Buddhist brothers were already in the water of Pure Land, which indicates guaranteed future rebirth there after death. Only her faithless mother’s seed was absent. Out of her affection for and worries about her mother, she came back to her family again to tell her relatives, especially her mother, of her experience in the Pure Land in order to convert her mother and strengthen her relatives’ faith. Again, in this story the daughter of Wei is depicted as both a pious and accomplished Pure Land practitioner and a loving daughter whose connection with her family did not terminate once she arrived in the Pure Land. This story is also included in Jiakai’s “Citations of [Stories] of the Appearances of

Contemporary Figures Reborn [in the Pure Land]” collection, although I suspect Jiakai put it in the lay male group by mistake. Interestingly, in this story the narrator showed no regretful view regarding the daughter’s early death without fulfilling her secular womanly duties, but displayed a negative attitude toward the mother who, despite fulfilling her womanly duties, did not hold Buddhist faith. The daughter is again represented as a miracle worker who actively traveled between the Pure Land and this world. What’s more, the story seems to contradict the androcentric dictum presented elsewhere in *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma*, as discussed above.

In the Tang period biographic records, long before the influence of Song and Ming Confucianism, lay female Pure Land believers’ stories depict them as miracle workers and even equals to lay males and monastic figures. In the Tang records, ideal lay female Pure Land practitioners are portrayed as either identical to male ones or secularly virtuous and religiously accomplished. This dual narrative means that, from the very beginning of Pure Land biographies recording the stories of lay female believers, there had already been a challenge to the so-called “misogynistic” doctrine in Chinese Buddhism.

During the Song dynasty, Pure Land biographies were included in Pure Land sectarian encyclopedias or other sectarian anthologies that Peng used as his sources (Getz 1998). These included stories in Zongxiao’s 宗曉 (1151–1214) famous Pure Land compendium *Anthology of the Blissful Country* (*Lebang wenlei* 樂邦文類), and later the Tiantai Buddhist compendium *Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs* (*Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀). Huang (1998) tries to show that since the beginning of the Song dynasty new Pure Land biographies were written, recompiled, or edited to reinforce a more complex and miraculous image of Pure Land practices, although early Northern Song texts are more oriented toward monastic figures. Huang’s conclusion is salient to our understanding of Peng’s portrayal of lay female Pure Land practitioners in two ways. First, many more miraculous and dramatic elements are added to the Song versions of the stories; certain Pure Land miraculous experiences were accidentally witnessed and not entirely within the control of monastic masters. Eminent monks in earlier monk biographies are often depicted as miracle workers themselves, actively holding control of their miraculous power to influence other people (Kieschnick 1997, pp. 67–111). In contrast to earlier eminent monks, Song period Pure Land biographies usually describe the majority of monastic Pure Land practitioners and lay practitioners, both male and female, as passive recipients of Amitābha’s miraculous response to one’s devotional practices, especially at the end of a practitioner’s life. For example, in the Northern Song Buddhist literati Wang Gu’s 王古 *New Edition of Pure Land Rebirth Biography* (*Xinxu jingtu wangsheng zhuan* 新修淨土往生傳), among the five Song dynasty monastic Pure Land practitioners’ biographies, none of them is portrayed as an active miracle performer. Rather, all five are devoted practitioners and recipients of Buddhas’ and Bodhisattvas’ mysterious salvations (X78, pp. 160a–161b). This later became a stable narrative in Pure Land biographies in the Ming period. In the five lay male Pure Land practitioners’ biographies in the *Anthology of the Blissful Country*, all five lay males again are depicted as pious believers who received miraculous responses from Buddha rather than as active miracle workers themselves (T47, pp. 195b–196c). The most comprehensive Pure Land biography collection, “History of the Establishment of the Pure Land Teaching” (*Jingtu lijiao zhi* 淨土立教志), is found in the Southern Song period Tiantai Buddhist compendium *Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*. In this collection, stories of lay males and females show no distinct differences regarding the miraculous scenes of their death and reported rebirth in the Pure Land. Rather, the biographies exhibit practitioners of both genders as devoted recipients of miraculous responses in a rather formulaic manner (T49, pp. 282b–288c).

The second reason Huang’s conclusion is salient to this project is that lay female practitioners in Song period biographies are sometimes portrayed as active miracle workers and even religious authorities in contrast to most of the lay males. Again, in Wang Gu’s collection there is a story dedicated to a Northern Song period lay female Pure Land practitioner, Lady Wu 吳氏 (X78, pp. 161b–161c). According to this story, the

scholar-official Lü Hong's 吕宏 wife Lady Wu was a devoted Buddhist living an ascetic lifestyle and worshipping the Buddhist deity Avalokiteśvara (*Guanyin pusa* 观音菩萨) and the *Diamond Sūtra*. One of her maids was also devoted to Buddhism and ate nothing but drank “spell” water Lady Wu made for several months. One day, after a long period of devotional practices, Lady Wu saw the vision of a pure and bright land with Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara's figures in it, and she knew in her heart that this was the Pure Land of Bliss. When asked about her vision, Lady Wu said she had seen that pristine Pure Land of Bliss and gained the miraculous “Supernormal Ability of the Eye” (*yantong* 眼通) (X78, p. 161b13).⁷ It was said that she could see the vision of the Pure Land regularly for three years, and Lady Wu at the end of her life predicted her successful rebirth. The story also stated that, because she could use her spell power to bless water offered to Avalokiteśvara with healing powers and miraculous light, she was also called “The County Lady Guanyin” (*Guanyin xianjun* 观音縣君). In this story Lady Wu is portrayed as a lay female miracle worker, just like the eminent monks in earlier periods. Moreover, her ascetic lifestyle is comparable to those magical monks who attained spell powers or miraculous abilities via long-term meditation, ritual practices, or ascetic lifestyles.

Another story in the *Anthology of the Blissful Country*, of the lay female Zhu Ruyi 朱如一, also depicts this imperial lady, the wife of Mr. Xue 薛, as a Pure Land “master” who, with devotional practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* and *nianfo*, initiated a Pure Land community of two-hundred thousand people (T47, pp. 197a–197b). In her later life Zhu Ruyi lived in a small hut near a cemetery and devoted all her time to *nianfo*, which apparently violated the Neo-Confucian ideal of domestic women. Her embroidered works depicting the *Lotus Sūtra* and images of Amitābha were consecrated and enshrined in a Buddhist monastery, in what is now Ningbo, in Zhejiang province. These embroideries were regarded as sacred objects with distinct femininity but were nevertheless worshiped by male figures. When she sold all her dowries to sponsor a Buddhist dharma assembly, more than ten thousand people, both lay and monastic, attended the event. This detail indicates Zhu's resistance to marital wealth and a secular womanly lifestyle. The monk who told Zhu's story praised her as a true Buddhist and stated that her lifestyle is impossible to follow even for a “Great Man” (*da zhangfu*). This is a story also included in Peng's biography, but the monk's comment is omitted (X88, p. 407b). As this case shows, it was not difficult for Song period Pure Land biographers to recognize lay female practitioners' religious authority and accomplishments over men and even monastic communities. Already in the Song sources, we see two kinds of narratives of lay female Pure Land practitioners. One describes them as devoted practitioners and recipients of miraculous salvation, similar to monastic and male figures. The other describes lay females as miracle performers or religious authorities themselves.

5. Narrative of Exemplary Lay Female Buddhists in Zhuhong's Writings

The famous late Ming period elite monk Yunqi Zhuhong's *Collection of Pure Land Rebirth* (*Wangsheng ji* 往生集) is perhaps one of the most well-known Ming Pure Land biography collections. It is also another major source and inspiration for Peng's collection. In this collection Zhuhong sets up a separate group of biographies of lay females of successful rebirth, following the tradition in the *Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs*. Additionally, he selected most of the stories of Song period practitioners from the *Chronicle*. Zhuhong is famous for his connection with local Confucian literati in southern China but is also known for his protestation of Song and Ming Confucian teachings on ethics (Eichman 2016, pp. 90–98). Chün-fang Yü (1981, pp. 72–73) argues that, although certain methods Zhuhong applied in reconciling secular ethical norms and Buddhist teachings were influenced by new Confucian and literati inventions in the Ming period, this influence more likely reveals his expedient reactions toward a changing environment for Buddhists at that time rather than his internalized approval of Confucian values.

Zhuhong's strategy for constructing eminent lay female Pure Land practitioners' biographies certainly echoes the scholarly observation of his attitude towards Confucianism and secular morality. In Zhuhong's collection there are regular depictions of male and

female lay practitioners whose long-devoted religious lives ended in miraculous death and alleged successful rebirth in the Pure Land, and these stories do not contain an explicit gender-specific narrative. For example, the Ming lay female Xu's wife is portrayed as follows:

Xu's wife, of the Ming period, was from Hangzhou. She was respectful, modest and by nature honest, and only took *nianfo* as her [major] business in life. When [she was] about to die, she summoned her family to say farewell. She [then] put on clean clothes and sat up straight. She held white flowers from Mount Tianmu in her hand and pinned them in her hair. She [then] died in great peace.

大明許氏婦，杭郡人。生平恭順質實，惟以念佛為事。將卒，呼家人與訣別。著淨衣端坐，手執天目白花，自簪之。安然而逝。(T51, p. 146b11–13)

We can compare Xu's wife with a Ming lay male's story in Zhuhong's collection:

Lay gentleman Hua, of the Ming period, was from Jianggan. [He was] honest without hypocrisy, and [he] always treated other people unflatteringly. In his middle age he entrusted his businesses to his sons and stayed in a room, separating [himself] from worldly affairs. In day and night, he was only dedicated to continuously performing *nianfo*. Later [when he] was about to die, he knew his time had come. [He] changed his clothes in his bedroom, [then] tidied his hat and sat up straight. [He] said farewell to others and died.

大明華居士，江干人。醇朴無偽，與人不款曲。中年屬業諸子，獨處一室，不涉世事。朝暮惟孜孜念佛而已。後將卒，自知時至。更衣正寢，手整冠端坐，別眾而逝。(T51, p. 143b10–15)

We can see that in Zhuhong's narrative of these two Ming lay figures there is no clear gender-specific image, apart from the accessories they wore before they died. Both Xu's wife and lay gentleman Hua are described as possessing virtuous character in a secular sense as well as a strong and persistent faith in the Pure Land. Fitting both secular moral ideals and religiously exemplary imagery, Zhuhong treated these two Ming period Pure Land lay practitioners with a rather asexual tone. I believe this narrative feature is inherited from early biographies. Song records do not particularly stress the secular integrity of lay practitioners, but we cannot assert that Zhuhong's focus has no predecessors at all. We have seen that celebrating lay Pure Land believers' secular integrity and religious devotion regardless of their gender is already visible in the Tang period records.

Moreover, there are also conspicuous gender-transgressive elements in Zhuhong's collection. Among those stories in Zhuhong's collection, select lay females are depicted as respected either like monastic figures or accomplished masters. Zhuhong left some valuable comments in the texts of these stories reflecting his personal views on the lay female figures. In the story of Lady Lu Yiren (*Lushi Yiren* 陸氏宜人), this pious Southern Song dynasty female practitioner died sitting towards the west with her hands in a "sealed" meditative gesture (*jieyin* 結印). Zhuhong stated that this detail shows the high level of accomplishment of Lady Lu's practice; this posture is usually seen among male monks (*seng* 僧), and that a lay female could accomplish this is truly exceptional among lay practitioners in both genders (T51, pp. 144c–145a). Zhuhong also selected a story of an old woman from the Song period, Cui (*Cuipo* 崔婆), who was cremated in the style of a monastic (*sengfa* 僧法)⁸ after her death and asserted rebirth in the Pure Land. In the story of Madam Wang (*Wangshi furen* 王氏夫人), also taking place during the Song dynasty, Zhuhong even criticized the opinion—popular at that time—that lay women rarely attain high accomplishment in Buddhist practice. Zhuhong asks, "Who said there are no eminent figures in ladies' inner chambers? [孰曰閨閣無人哉]" (T51, p. 144b29).

Zhuhong also challenged the traditional Buddhist misogynistic view on the deficiency of the female body in an apologetic manner:

The old woman Li [who married into] the Hu family in the Song was from Shangyu. After her husband died, [she] chanted Buddha's name [*nianfo*] day and night, and also chanted the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* for decades. One

day [she] saw a monk who covered [her] in a crimson canopy and said [to her]: “You will be reborn [in the Pure Land] on the fifteenth day [of this month] at the double-hour of *zi*.” [She] asked who the master monk was, and [the monk] said: “[I] am he whose name you chanted.” The old woman then bid farewell to her relatives. On the day there were extraordinary fragrances and light, [in which Li] sat up straight and died. After seven days [her body] was cremated, and [instead of turning into black ashes] her teeth were as white as jade, her tongue like red lotus, [and] her eyes like grapes. They were all pure, solid, and persistent, and the bone relics⁹ [she left] were countless. The next day a flower had blossomed at the place where [she] was cremated, and it was said that [the flower] resembled a white poppy. [Zhuhong] complimented that: [Her] various bodily organs¹⁰ were persistent, and [her] bone relics were countless. People ridiculed the female body as possessing five kinds of defilements, but [in the case of Li] anything is possible.

宋胡長婆李氏，上虞人。夫喪後，日夜高聲念佛，及誦《彌陀經》，凡十餘年。一日見有僧覆以緋蓋，曰：“汝十五日子時往生。”問師何人，曰：“是汝所念者。”婆遂會別諸親。至期有異香光明，端坐而逝。七日焚化，齒如白玉，舌如紅蓮，睛如葡萄，皆精堅不壞。舍利不可數計。次日焚處生一花，如白罌粟云。贊曰：諸根不壞，舍利無數。世譏女人五漏之體，無乃不可乎。(T51, p. 144a23–b2)

Here Zhuhong not only omitted details about Li's domestic life as a widow, but also celebrated the possibility of a female body attaining high accomplishments by praising the old woman Li's bone relics.¹¹ Apparently, to Zhuhong, the idea that the female body is naturally deficient and thus excluded from the Pure Land and achieving high levels of Buddhist cultivation was ridiculous. There is a particular story of Ming dynasty lay woman Lady Xue (*Xueshi* 薛氏) (T51, pp. 146a–b) in which Zhuhong mocked those who valued Confucian ritual propriety and social norms over Buddhist norms. Zhuhong suggested that the Confucian ideal death position of lie-low contradicts the Buddhist proper death position of sitting straight in cross-leg. Xue was a noble lady from a scholar-official's family in Wutang 武塘, in today's Hunan province. Lady Xue was married into the Zhou 周 family and widowed after giving birth to five sons. She was a devoted Pure Land practitioner and the incense sticks she offered to Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) burned in the shape of a lotus, which was marveled at by her peers. Four days prior to her death she started to restlessly practice *nianfo* and spell chanting. She put a “Zhigong Hat” (*Zhigong mao* 誌公帽), a kind of headpiece for male Buddhist monks,¹² on her head (T51, p. 146a26). On the day of her death there were miraculous fragrances and she sat cross-legged with her hands in a sealed posture as she died. There was no sign of death on her body and, in fact, after she died her body looked even more lively. Her sons put her into a shrine following her will and thousands of people paid respect to her incorruptible body.

Zhuhong used this particular case to show that auspicious bodily symbols on lay female practitioners' bodies near death are superior to Confucian ritualistic codes and normative rules dictating funeral practices. As such, literati males should not impair or obstruct such Buddhist bodily symbols according to their own limited understanding of Buddhist miracles and death rituals. Since Xue was Zhuhong's acquaintance, Zhuhong probably witnessed her death himself and used her case to criticize ignorant Confucian ritual propriety. He commented:

It was the mother [Xue's] request upon death that a Buddhist shrine should be prepared [for her corpse]. There was no casket, no killing ritual to please gods, no paper money burning, and no killing sacrifice to ancestors.¹³ Her sons willingly obeyed [their mother's will] without any disagreement. I heard that there was [a male Buddhist] who died sitting cross-legged, but his son out of the fear of violating Confucian norms pulled [his father's] leg to stretch the body [in order to make it lie down]. The father suddenly raised his arm to hit his son, and the

son said in fear: “[I was] only trying to help you to die sitting.” Now [if we] see the sons of Zhou, what is the reason [they could obey their mother’s will]?

母遺命具龕。無棺槨，無迎殺神，無燒紙錢，無殺牲以祭。諸子悉隨順不二。吾聞：昔有臨終坐脫者，子恐乖名教，拽其足伸之。父忽躍臂捶子。子懼曰：“助父坐脫耳。”視今日周氏諸子，為何如？(T51, p. 146b2–6)

Here Zhuhong clearly held a negative view on the Confucian and popular funeral rituals and suggested that even those male literati descendants should obey their female Buddhist elder’s religious request. In this sense, Zhuhong put the importance of this lay female Buddhist’s religiosity over her male relatives’ Confucian pursuits. Zhuhong’s comment is perhaps in response to systematic movements initiated by conservative Confucian literati and officials in the Ming to promote Zhu Xi’s version of family rituals in southern China including Zhu Xi’s stipulated Confucian funeral ritual process, in which any distinctly Buddhist religious element is strictly forbidden (Zhao 2010; Zhang 2021). In some personal writings Zhuhong explicitly stated that Confucian family pursuits—including producing male heirs—are nothing but shackles for women, and that devoted lay female Buddhists should actively resist any kind of secular pursuits in order to achieve higher religious goals (Jian 2007, pp. 169–171).¹⁴ His renunciation of Confucian gender norms can also be witnessed in the “General Conclusion” (Zonglun 總論) section of his collection’s lay female biography chapter. In this section he proclaimed that “There are no women in the Pure Land. Once a woman is reborn [in the Pure Land], then [she] will have all the appearances of a Great Man . . . in the realm of purity, [one] cannot even find the true appearance of male, not to mention that of female. [極樂國土，實無女人。女既得生，悉具大丈夫相 . . . 清淨界中，覓男相尚不可得，況女相乎？]” (T51, p. 146b15–18).

Zhuhong also responded to certain questions concerning why women are excluded from the Pure Land as recorded in the scriptures, and what the term “Great Man” in the Pure Land means. Zhuhong tended to understand “no women but only Great Men” in the Pure Land doctrines as indicating that beings in the Pure Land are asexual or do not conform to a gender binary, instead of meaning that women are all transformed into men in a worldly sense. That is to say, in Zhuhong’s understanding, because a sentient being will automatically gain enlightenment in the Pure Land, one will naturally transcend all dualities, including gender. In this transcendental state the physical differences of gender are nothing but a mirage. And, by realizing the spurious nature of gender, one is neither male nor female but can only be described as a “Great Man” in a general sense. This is perhaps why Zhuhong narrated Ming lay female practitioners in a non-binary manner, since in his understanding of this Pure Land doctrine, gender is a dichotomy that should be challenged. Zhuhong’s narrative could be part of a broader view on gender, indicating his admiration of women’s agency in Chan Buddhist records of the Ming period. In these Chan Buddhist texts, doubtful views on women’s practice and admiration co-exist (Grant 2008). Therefore, we can see a relatively gender-equal attitude in Zhuhong’s narrative and comments. Zhuhong chose different texts from different sources to create his narrative of the ideal image of lay female practitioners according to his own perspective on gender. The diverse narrative styles from different provenances were collected, edited, and commented upon in Zhuhong’s collection to challenge Confucian normative rules and expectations on lay women.

6. Peng Shaosheng’s Modification of Zhuhong’s Gender Narrative

As we have seen, the depiction of lay female Pure Land practitioners throughout China’s history is not monolithic but diverse. Moreover, within this diverse tradition there had been a persistent attitude of celebrating female agency and non-binary gender construction. We must be aware that this trend is discontinued in Peng’s collection, in which a vast range of stories of lay women from as early as the Northern and Southern dynasties period to Peng’s own time are selected to serve one consistent and normative purpose: to build up a more singular image of the ideal lay Pure Land female. This image, constructed to serve Peng’s agenda, is one that should not challenge Confucian disciplines

on women and ought to prove that Pure Land lay females will never provoke social and familial upheavals. Rather, as these women could fulfil both their Confucian duties and Buddhist religious goals, they will promote social harmony. Peng claimed in another of his Pure Land biographies, *The Compendium of Pure Land Sages* (*Jingtu shengxian lu* 淨土聖賢錄), that he wished to follow the previous monastic patriarchs' exploits in collecting devoted Pure Land practitioners' miraculous stories; and, Zhuhong is one of the inspiring figures Peng wished to follow (X78, p. 216c). This compendium, unlike the *Biographies of Good Women*, is without explicit Confucian agenda. However, in the preface Peng still expressed that the narratives and content of Pure Land biographies in the past were miscellaneous and without a unified formula, and that certain elements of previous biographies are not appropriate for his contemporaneous readers. Peng even wrote:

The records included in the collections mentioned above are not consistent in their simplicity and complexity, and those refined [stories] and coarse [stories] are mixed up. Without meticulous discrimination [one] cannot avoid being confounded [by those stories]. Hence [I] scrutinized the original texts, and consulted the old books. [I] added my own embellishment on them in order to make [these stories] fit in my own criteria.

從上諸家紀述，繁簡不齊，雅俗並奏。不經甄別，難免淆訛。茲斟酌舊文，參稽往牒，加之潤飾，就我準繩。(X78, p. 217a17–19)

Thus, he admitted that he had a personal standard in editing and selecting these texts. Those he regarded unsuitable, including stories of practitioners committing suicide for quick rebirth in the Pure Land, are excluded. Clearly, certain provocative elements are considered transgressive to Confucian social norms and not the “correct” kind of material for Qing period Buddhist readers. But what were his “personal criteria”? In the *Biographies of Good Women*, Peng's intention to modify those previous stories that were contrary to Confucian gender norms is disclosed in his preface. He expressed his personal distrust of those morally corrupted or improper women who were reborn in the Pure Land (X88, p. 399c). At the very beginning of this collection of biographies of lay females, Peng reiterated the misogynistic Buddhist doctrine as the underlying attitude on women in his collection; this doctrine is absent in previous monastic narratives of lay Pure Land females. He wrote: “... In the past Buddha reproached women, as they are replete with all kinds of fiendishness and defilement. For those who are contaminated by them, the risk [in them] is worse than imprisonment ... [佛昔呵女人，具足諸妖穢。其有染著者，患乃甚牢獄 ...]” (X88, p. 399b13–14). Peng also claimed that apart from Buddhist biographies, this collection is also inspired by early Confucian biographies of exemplary women (*lienü zhuan* 列女傳) whose chastity and submissive character are considered prior to their personal achievements (X88, p. 401a). In this sense, under both the Confucian disciplines of women and the Buddhist misogynistic discourse, Peng wished to shape the ideal image of lay females as those who could on the one hand stay obedient in their inferior domestic arena and on the other act devote themselves to Buddhist faith and practices.

This attitude is embodied in his manipulation of narratives in the stories, as Wu (2013) has shown in detail in the cases of Peng's recounts of his contemporary Qing dynasty women. Scholars (Byrne 2016; Wu 2020) highlight one example in particular to support their reading of Peng as androcentric and pro-Confucian gender duality: the biography of a Qing period lay female Pure Land practitioner, Tao Shan 陶善, who was also Peng's relative. In Tao's own writings and poetry, she celebrated female agency in attaining Buddhist enlightenment and the non-gendered aspect of Pure Land rebirth against a Confucian patriarchal society (Byrne 2016). In contrast to her own literary reflection of her gender views, Peng depicted her as a subordinate woman who fulfilled her domestic gender demands prior to her retreat to Pure Land practice (Wu 2020). Tao Shan's case might be representative in reflecting Peng's view of Qing lay women who were already subject to the Qing period's Confucian gender discourse. I believe that beyond his “designs” of the stories about contemporaneous Qing lay females, Peng deliberately manipulated the previous monastic narrative of lay female Pure Land followers and betrayed the old

non-binary gender view. That is, he not only manipulated the contemporary, Qing period stories but also the stories he transmitted from earlier works, all to further his androcentric Confucian views. As mentioned before, in Peng's reiteration of the story of Zhu Ruyi he omitted the original comment made by the monk narrator praising Lady Zhu's lifestyle as surpassing most of the male monks and even the Buddhist Great Men. He even deleted the detail that Zhu's embroidered scrolls of Buddhist scriptures were consecrated and worshiped by male monks in Buddhist temples, which clearly challenges male authority and accepts Zhu's religious superiority as a lay female master.

Moreover, in his adaptation of stories in Zhuhong's collection, the "betrayal" of monastic non-binary gender narratives is even more evident. In Peng's version of the story of Lady Xue (mentioned above in Section 4), the example of a dying Buddhist father reprimanding the Confucian son is deleted (X88, p. 411c). This shows that Peng did not want to represent this story as a direct denial of Confucian ritual propriety, as Zhuhong did. In another story, of Zhang's Mother (*Zhangmu* 張母), Lady Tao (*Taoshi* 陶氏), Zhuhong established her as a female figure who guided and surpassed the males in her family:

Zhang's mother Lady Tao of the Ming dynasty was the second wife of the Lay Gentleman Zhang Shouyue in Chuangshui. Gentleman Zhang was converted to Buddhism because of her guidance. [She] chanted Buddhist scriptures every day incessantly. [One day] Gentleman Zhang went out to pay a respectful visit to Putuo Mountain. The mother said to her two sons: "I contemplate on the two sentences [from the scripture] 'It is the heart that attains Buddhahood; it is the heart that is the true Buddha,' in daily life. Now I begin to understand. On the fourth day [of this month], I shall leave." When the time arrived [she] sat up straight and died. The next day [after her death] Gentleman Zhang came back to encoffin her. Suddenly, five green lotus flowers grew out of her casket. Gentleman Zhang was astonished and ashamed since in spite of her daily company for a long time, he did not realize her Buddhist achievement [was as high] as such. All those in her neighborhood or from afar who saw and heard [Tao's achievement] praised and admired [her].

大明張母，陶氏，為長水守約居士繼室。居士奉佛，母化之。日課誦無間。居士出禮普陀，母謂二子曰：“吾平日參‘是心作佛，是心是佛’二語。今始悟。初四日，吾行矣。”及期端坐而逝。次日居士歸成殮，俄而棺上出青蓮花五朵。居士大駭異，自愧恒常與俱，不知其道行如此。遠近見聞，靡不嘆慕。(T51, p. 148b12–18)

Again, Zhuhong celebrated Tao's religious superiority as a lay woman over her male relatives and accentuated the husband's shame when realizing his wife was an accomplished Buddhist, far better than himself. But in Peng's version, neither Tao's conversion of her husband nor the husband's expression of shame appeared. Peng even changed the story's narrative into "Gentleman Zhang was devoted in the practice of Pure Land, and in [his daily] dietary custom [he was] stoic. After Tao married Zhang, [she] also started to chant Buddhist scriptures incessantly. [居士精修淨土，一蔬一飯，泊如也。陶氏自歸張，亦課誦無間。]" (X88, p. 412a9–10). Zhang's devotional Buddhist lifestyle is completely absent in Zhuhong's version of the story and there was no clear specification on when Tao started her Buddhist practice. This interesting twist of narrative delivers the opposite message of Zhuhong's version; Peng clearly implied that it was the husband who cast influence on Tao's Buddhist belief. Peng's story shows a reversed image of Tao, as someone who was married into a Buddhist family already strong with Pure Land faith and who, following her husband's dedicated religiosity, was able to achieve extraordinary results in the end. Interestingly, in Zhuhong's original story the title is Zhang's Mother, which indicates Tao as a superior and senior female figure in the family. In Peng's version, by contrast, the title is Lady Tao (*Taoshi* 陶氏), which is a way to address a wife. This title change trick can also be found in another of Peng's adaptations of Zhuhong's stories, in the story of Lady Xu (*Xushi* 徐氏). Zhuhong started the story by introducing Xu as the mother of the Lu 陸

family (T51: 149b), positioning her as the elder in Lu's clan, whereas in Peng's version Xu is introduced at the beginning as Gentleman Lu's wife (X88, p. 412a).

Another story with contradicting narratives included in both Zhuhong's and Peng's collection is about the life story of a Song literati's wife Madam Feng (Fengshi furen 馮氏夫人). This story first appears in the Song lay Buddhist Wang Rixiu's 王日休 (?–1173CE) Pure Land anthology *Longshu's Extended Collection of Pure Land Literature* (Longshu zengguang jingtu wen 龍舒增廣淨土文) (T47, p. 269b). Originally in the story, Madam Feng got severely sick immediately before her marriage and no physician could cure her symptoms. Out of desperation she followed the monk Ci Shoushen's 慈受深 advice of practicing *nianfo* and living an ascetic life. Her disease was cured in her *nianfo* retreat and she then continued her practice for decades in her marriage, abstaining herself from secular life. One day after composing a poem expressing her enlightenment, she predicted that she will soon die and get reborn in the Pure Land. The original story describes Madam Feng as a female figure purely dedicated to her Buddhist faith and detached herself from the secular world and secular female duties. In the *Anthology of the Blissful Country* version of this story, Zongxiao also depicted Feng as an ascetic figure and even praised her religious determination "as strong as a man" (*jian ru nanzi* 健如男子) (T47, p. 191a22–23). This narrative is preserved in Zhuhong's version, and he even used the term "being tired of the world" (*yanshi* 厭世) to describe her sudden enlightenment near death (T51, p. 144c3). Both the original story and Zhuhong's retell do not contain any information about Feng fulfilling secular female duties or taking care of her family. However, in Peng's version, he added a detail in the text saying that after Feng's disease was cured in her *nianfo* retreat, she "managed her housework as usual but at the same time continued her Pure Land practice" (理家事如初，亦不廢淨業) (X88, p. 406a22–23). This is detail that never appeared in the three versions mentioned above and clearly Peng intended to transform Feng's image into a pious lay female who could also fulfill her secular duties. Therefore, we can conclude that Peng's Confucian narrative of lay female Pure Land practitioners is not limited to his observation of his contemporaneous Qing dynasty women. Rather, it is also systematically applied to stories of lay females in the past. Furthermore, Peng's Confucian-influenced appropriation of the Pure Land biographies forms a gender narrative that is markedly different from the preceding monastic patriarchs' tradition. That is to say, Peng's recount of and attitude toward lay female Buddhists in China is a specific personal invention, rather than a continued convention in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

7. Conclusions

Systematic collection of biographies of Pure Land Buddhists' life stories and miraculous experiences has been a long-lasting tradition in China, one that can be dated back to the Tang dynasty. As a specific genre used to proselytize Pure Land Buddhist teachings and practices, these stories were told, written, and edited in different dynasties, and certain stories were reiterated in different texts. However, these texts cannot be seen as a monolithic group of records holding unanimous voices and stances. In the case of lay females recorded in these stories, from the earliest collections during the Tang period to the latest ones in late imperial China, women's roles, positions, and gender identities as Pure Land Buddhists are not unified according to static doctrines and social norms. In our comparison between Peng Shaosheng's narrative of lay female Pure Land practitioners in China and earlier monastic narratives of similar groups of women, we see that the Buddhist misogynistic doctrine had not been exercised unwaveringly throughout history. Rather, records of lay female Pure Land practitioners by monastic patriarchs contain a relatively persistent view celebrating lay women's equality (if not superiority) to, and religious achievement over, men and monastic believers. The monk master Yunqi Zhuhong's collection of lay female biographies in his Pure Land biography collections is perhaps the most representative case of these non-binary gender views. In his collections, Zhuhong even explicitly challenged the Confucian gender dichotomy of his time. In contrast, in Peng's narrative as a Confucian scholar as well as a Buddhist, these stories are adapted to fit the Confucian view on

women as submissive and inferior to men. To fit this narrative, Peng wished to transform these stories into examples showing that exemplary lay women's Pure Land beliefs did not conflict with Confucian domestic and secular duties for women. By doing so, Peng Shaosheng invented his own Confucian narrative of lay female Pure Land believers rather than continuing an existing tradition, as he claimed to do.

Funding: This research was funded by National Social Science Fund of China, grant number: 17ZDA233/19CZJ004.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: My editor Gina Lebkuecher has thoroughly read through this paper and edited it and I really appreciate her work in completing this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ There have been abundant academic works in Chinese, English and Japanese that comprehensively explain the historical development of Chinese and East Asian Pure Land traditions; see Charles B. Jones (2019) *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice* and Tsukamoto Zenryū's well-known work *Chugoku jūdōkyō shi kenkū* (Tsukamoto 1976).
- ² As the term "Neo-Confucian" is still problematic in its meaning, in this paper I will still label the new Confucian developments since the Song as "Confucian" to show its continuity from earlier Confucian discourses. But I hope the readers could be aware that the kind of Confucian tradition salient to Peng Shaosheng's writing is this new tradition in Song, Ming and Qing.
- ³ Daoist practices and theories during late imperial China undoubtedly influenced Buddhist and Confucian views on gender. However, a thorough discussion of these traditions is outside the scope of this paper. For more information about Daoist conceptions of gender during this period, see Valussi's work quoted in the main text.
- ⁴ For Peng's autobiography see "Zhigui zi zhuan 知歸子傳" (X88, pp. 290b–291a); see also Ge and Wang (2006).
- ⁵ Here the term "monastic patriarch" does not refer to a strict sectarian Pure Land patriarch lineage like the case in Japanese Pure Land tradition, but rather a series of monastic Pure Land authors who were considered as belonging to a looser lineage of Pure Land clan later in Song, Ming and Qing. Jones (2019, pp. 25–31) has pointed out that the identities and lineage of these Chinese "patriarchs" were constructed in later period not as a strict "master-disciple" clan but to highlight eminent figures and monastic authorities in history. Accordingly, their narrative "tradition" in this article refers to the common features their writings share rather than a clearly defined custom.
- ⁶ This is a story the compiler extracted from an earlier Buddhist miracle story collection *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記, but the original book is lost and this is the only version available.
- ⁷ There is a confusion in the text about who talked about the miraculous experience, Lady Wu or her maid. I insist that the text refers to Lady Wu's experience since the whole story is dedicated to her accomplishment.
- ⁸ *Seng* 僧 here might only refers to monastic male since in Zhuhong's collection he called Buddhist nuns "ni 尼". But Zhuhong never used "nifa" to describe Buddhist nun's funeral. So in this Old Lady Cui story, *sengfa* might only refer to funerals in monastic style without a gender-specific connotation.
- ⁹ Also called Śāriṃ, *sheli* 舍利.
- ¹⁰ A Buddhist concept known as *indriya* including sensual organs: the eyes, nose, tongue, ears, and the whole body.
- ¹¹ These kind of bone relics and mummified body (both called *sheli*) were usually understood as remains of Buddhist "saints" and a proof of their accomplishment. They were enshrined and venerated for their miraculous power, but very often this kind of veneration of bodily relics was limited to monastic figures, see Ritzinger and Bingenheimer (2006).
- ¹² See <http://buddhaspace.org/dict/fk/data/%25E5%25B8%25BD%25E5%25AD%2590.html>, accessed on 23 June 2021, for more information about the "Zhigong Hat."
- ¹³ These perhaps are the animal killing and meat sacrifice rituals involved in Ming funeral rituals based on Zhu Xi's version of Confucian funeral ritual and the Confucian classic the *Rite of Zhou*, see Chi (2017, pp. 24, 131–32, 145–52).
- ¹⁴ As Zhuhong once wrote: "君不見，東家婦，健如虎，腹孕常將年月數，昨宵猶自倚門閭，今朝命已歸黃土..." , this is a poem expressing his lament on those women who were shackled by domestic duties without Buddhist faith and devotion, see Yunqi Zhuhong (Yunqi 1983, pp. 4428–29).

References

Primary Sources

- T Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新修大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡海旭, et al. Tōkyō: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankō kai, 1924–1934.
- X Wanzī xuzang jīng 卮續藏經. Taipei: Xinwen feng 新文豐, 1975.

Secondary Sources

- Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2009. The Bahudhātuka-sutta and Its Parallels on Women's Inabilities. *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16: 137–90.
- Byrne, Christopher. 2016. Using a Thorn to Dig Out a Thorn: A Buddhist Laywoman's Response to Gender Ideology in Late Imperial China. *Journal of Religion and Culture* 26: 64–86.
- Chen, Lei 陳雷. 2019. Songdai fojiao shisuhua de xiangdu jiqi qishi 宋代佛教世俗化的向度及其啓示. *Ningxia shehui kexue* 寧夏社會科學 5: 157–63.
- Chi, Xuefeng 池雪豐. 2017. Mingdai sangli yijie kao 明代喪禮儀節考. Ph.D. thesis, Zhejiang daxue 浙江大學, Zhejiang, China.
- de Bary, Wm. Theodore. 1993. The Uses of Neo-Confucianism: A Response to Professor Tillman. *Philosophy East and West* 43: 541–55. [CrossRef]
- Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. 1993. *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Eichman, Jennifer. 2016. *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections*. Leiden: Brill.
- Furth, Charlotte. 1999. *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Ge, Huiye 葛慧曄, and Weiwei Wang 王偉偉. 2006. Qingdai sixiang jia Peng Shaosheng 清代思想家彭紹昇. *Jiangsu difang zhi* 江蘇地方志 6: 41–42.
- Getz, Daniel Aaron. 1998. Pure Land Societies and the Pure Land Patriarchate in Tsung-hsiao's Le-pang wen-lei and the Pure Land Tradition of the Sung Period. In *The Record of Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism (3rd): The "Earthly" Pure Land and Contemporary Society*. Taipei: Fagu wenhua chubanshe 法鼓文化出版社.
- Grant, Beata. 2008. Da Zhangfu: The Gendered Rhetoric of Heroism and Equality in Seventeenth-Century Chan Buddhist Discourse Records. *Nan Nü* 10: 177–211. [CrossRef]
- Harrison, Paul. 1998. Women in the Pure Land: Some Reflections on the Textual Sources. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26: 553–72. [CrossRef]
- Hsieh, Ding-hwa E. 2002. Images of Women in Ch'an Buddhist Literature of the Sung Period. In *Buddhism in the Sung*. Edited by Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz Jr. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 148–87.
- Huang, Qijiang 啓江. 1998. Mituo jingtu de zhuixun: Beisong 'wangsheng xifang' zhuzuo de taitao 彌陀淨土的追尋——北宋“往生西方”著作的探討. *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 16: 59–86.
- Jian, Ruiyao 簡瑞瑤. 2007. *Mingdai funü fojiao xinyang yu shehui guifan* 明代婦女佛教信仰與社會規範. Taichung: Don hai daxue tongshi jiaoyu zhongxin 東海大學通識教育中心.
- Jones, Charles B. 2019. *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kajiyama, Yuichi. 1982. Women in Buddhism. *Eastern Buddhist* 15: 53–70.
- Kieschnick, John H. 1997. *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kleine, Christoph. 1998. Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography: A Study of Accounts of Women Who Attained Birth in Amida's Pure Land. *Bulletin De L'École Française D'Extrême-Orient* 85: 325–61. [CrossRef]
- Liang, Qichao 梁超. 2001. *Lun Zhongguo xueshu sixiang bianqian zhi daqushi* 中思想之大. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社.
- Liu, Changdong 劉長東. 2000. *Jintang mituo jingtu xinyang yanjiu* 晉唐彌陀淨土信仰研究. Chengdu: Bashu shushe 巴蜀書社.
- Li, Yuzhen 李玉珍. 2017. Zhenxin jianjie: Peng Jiqing Shan nüren zhuan de nüxing dianfan 貞信堅節：彭際清《善女人傳》的女性典範. In *Ronghe zhiji: Fojiao yu zhongguo chuantong* 融合之跡：佛教與中國傳統. Edited by Jinhua Jia 賈晉華. Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社, pp. 185–210.
- Lo, Yuet-keung. 2013. Indeterminacy in Meaning: Religious Syncretism and Dynastic Historiography in the Shannüren zhuan. *Gender & History* 25: 461–76.
- Makeham, John. 2010. Introduction. In *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. Edited by John Makeham. Heidelberg, London and New York: Springer, pp. ix–xliii.
- Mann, Susan. 1997. *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Moitra, Shefali. 2002. *Feminist Thought: Androcentrism, Communication and Objectivity*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub Pvt Ltd.
- Ogasawara, Senshu 小笠原宣秀. 1951. *Chugoku jūdo kyōka no kenkyū* 中國淨土教家研究. Kyoto: Heirakutera shōten 平寺書店.
- Overmyer, Daniel L. 1981. Women in Chinese Religions: Submission, Struggle, Transcendence. In *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism in Honour of Professor Jan Yun-hua*. Edited by Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schoper. Oakville: Mosaic press, pp. 91–129.
- Qian, Yin 錢寅. 2020. Qingdai shilin jushi Peng Shaosheng de rufo heliu sixiang 清代士林居士彭紹昇的儒佛合流思想. *Chuanshan xuekan* 船山學刊 3: 81–91.

- Ritzinger, Justin, and Marcus Bingenheimer. 2006. Whole-body relics in Chinese Buddhism—Previous Research and Historical Overview. *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 7: 37–94.
- Rowe, William T. 1998. Women and the Family in Mid-Qing Social Thought: The Case of Ch'en Hung-mou. *Late Imperial China* 13: 1–41. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1983. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 2005. Androcentrism. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. Edited by Lindsay Jones. Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, vol. I, pp. 334–37. First published 1987.
- Shek, Richard. 1993. Testimony to the Resilience of the Mind: The Life and Thought of Peng Shaosheng (1740–1796). In *Cosmology, Ontology and Human Efficacy: Essays in Chinese Thought*. Edited by Richard Smith and Daniel Wynn-Ye Kwok. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 81–112.
- Sponberg, Alan. 1992. Attitudes toward women and the feminine in early Buddhism. In *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*. Edited by J. Cabezon. Delhi: Sri Satguru, pp. 3–36.
- Tsukamoto, Zenryū 塚本善隆. 1976. *Chugoku jūdōkyō shi kenkyū* 中土教史研究. Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha 大東出版社.
- Valussi, Elena. 2008. Blood, Tigers, Dragons: The Physiology of Transcendence for Women. *Asian Medicine* 4: 46–85. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Walker, Caroline Bynum. 1991. Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality. In *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. Edited by Caroline Bynum Walker. Cambridge: MIT Press and Zone Books, pp. 27–52.
- Wang, Xi 王. 2017. Kunde: Rujia nüxing rengen de yangcheng yu xiaoying: Yi Zhu Xi nüxing lunli weilu 坤德:儒家女性人格的養成與效應——以朱熹女性倫理為例. *Shehui kexue* 社會科學家 7: 49–54.
- Wu, Hongyu. 2013. Leading the Good Life: Peng Shaosheng's Biographical Narratives and Instructions for Buddhist Laywomen in High Qing China (1683–1796). Ph.D. thesis, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA.
- Wu, Hongyu. 2020. Women, Bodily Transformation and Rebirth in the Pure Land in the Writings of Chinese Buddhists in the Eighteenth Century. *Gender & History* 32: 227–46.
- Xu, Man. 2016. *Crossing the Gate: Everyday Lives of Women in Song Fujian (960–1279)*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Yü, Chün-Fang. 1981. *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Zhuhong and the Late Ming Synthesis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yunqi, Zhuhong 雲棲株宏. 1983. Chujia bieshi rentang 出家別室人湯. In *Lianchi dashi quanji* 蓮池大師全集. Taipei: Zhonghua fojiao wenhua guan 中華佛教文化館, vol. 4, pp. 4428–29.
- Zhang, Qingjiang 張清江. 2021. Zhuzi jiali yu Ming Qing zhujiang sanjiaozhou sangzang liyi shijian——yi difangzhi wei zhongxin de kaocha 《朱子家禮》與明清珠江三角洲喪葬禮儀實踐——以地方志為中心的考察. *Zhongguo difang zhi* 中國地方志 1: 95–108.
- Zhao, Kesheng 趙克生. 2010. Xiushu, ketu yu guanli: Mingdai difang shehui de jiali chuanbo 修書、刻圖與觀禮:明代地方社會的家禮傳播. *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 中國史研究 1: 125–44.
- Zhou, Ye 周驊. 2014. Ming Qing zhiji zhongguo fojiao de rushi zhuanxiang 明清之際中國佛教的入世轉向. *Zongjiao xue yanjiu* 宗教學研究 4: 131–35.
- Zhu, Xi 朱熹. 1982. *Xiaoxue jizhu* 小學集註. Wenyan ge siku quanshu ben 文淵閣四庫全書本. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社. First published 1782.