
Grant's book introduces a group of women Chan masters who flourished during the brief rise of Chan Buddhism in seventeenth-century China. Nuns have often been maligned and slandered in Chinese literature and didactic writings. Grant wants to obliterate these preconceived ideas about nuns moonlighting as entertainers or as “denizens of the world of flower-Chan” (p. 4). At the same time, Grant informs the reader in Chapter 1 that the book is not going to portray nuns only as spiritual transcendents and virtuous paragons. Her motive is to toss out these two-dimensional stock-images, and present a “multidimensional perspective,” based primarily on how these nuns wrote about themselves or how they would have preferred to be remembered.

However, her modest claim of only wanting to introduce how women Chan masters wrote about themselves, does no justice to her skills in weaving together disparate sources from within and outside the Chan Buddhist canon. The bulk of her materials come from seven “collected discourse records,” or yulu, comprised of the sermons, letters, poems, biographical or autobiographical accounts, and records of activities of seventeenth-century women Chan masters. These records were included in the Jiaxing canon published between 1589-1707. The Jiaxing canon, also known as the Mount Jing Tripitaka (Jingshan zang) or the Lengyan Monastery edition (Lengyan si ban), was a privately printed edition of sacred Buddhist scriptures and other texts, such as the yulu. Given that the yulu were only compiled for recognized masters (predominantly men), the presence of these writings effectively guaranteed their subjects’ legacies within the Chan Linji lineage, which can be traced back to Linji Yixuan (d. 866). The Linji (Rinzai) lineage is one of five major houses within Chan (Zen) Buddhism and texts such as the yulu are crucial in establishing its history. Grant practises much restraint as she uses these “highly crafted texts” as historical documents and provides comments throughout when claims could not be verified or appear exaggerated. She supplements these sources with other primary sources, such as local gazetteers and women's poetry collections.

In Chapter 1, Grant provides a brief history of Buddhism up to the seventeenth century and introduces a few women Chan Buddhist masters from earlier periods, such as Moshan Liaoran in the Tang period and Miaozong (1095-1170). In Chapter 2, Grant discusses the portrayal of nuns in the writings of seventeenth-century monks, highlighting the contentious nature of women claiming the roles of Chan masters, and how women Chan masters overcame such polemics by appropriating the language of male Chan masters. The remaining chapters document the lives of the seven women Chan masters whose yulu were included in the Jiaxing canon. Grant conveys the incredible richness of their
lives. For instance, she describes their exploration of Chan enlightenment, occasional eremitism, arduous travels to funerary stupas and studies under famous Chan masters; and their administrative duties—running convents and cloisters and raising funds for temple renovations. Most importantly, she tells us how they instructed disciples, both lay and religious, and designated Dharma heirs to ensure Chan lineage posterity. In Chapters 3 and 4, the “matriarch of seventeenth-century women Chan masters” (p. 37), Qiyuan Xinggang (1597-1654) is introduced. Chapter 5 is devoted to the Dharma heirs of Qiyuan Xinggang, with emphasis on two with extant discourse records, Yikui Chaochen (1625-1679) and Yigong Chaoke (1615-1661). Grant notes that the two Dharma heirs collated their master's yulu, and Yikui Chaochen completed the biography of their master. In Chapter 6, we are introduced to a younger contemporary of Qiyuan Xinggang, Jizong Xingche (b.1606). She was an equally dynamic abbess and skillful poet whose works were included in Wang Duanshu’s 1667 anthology of women’s poetry. Chapters 7 and 8 respectively present Baochi Jizong and Zukui Jifu, two Dharma heirs of a prominent male Chan master, Jiqi Hongchu (1605-1672), a loyal supporter of the Ming dynasty. Both women were known for their command of the classical Chan textual tradition and the quality of their own writings. In Chapter 9 we meet Ziyong Chengru, whose extensive travels provided much material for her poems. Since she was an abbess in the Beijing area, she was well-connected at the Imperial City.

The ambivalence of gender is a key theme throughout the book. Grant captures the instability of their identities when she tells us that these women Chan masters were “honorary males” (p. 35). Although they were often lauded as dazhang fu (great gentleman) or “manly men,” they were distinguished from male Chan masters. Male Chan masters and male lay Chan Buddhist disciples generally referred to them only as disciples, and compared them to female disciples of past Dharma masters (i.e. Moshan Liaoran and Miaozong). In contrast, in their self-representations these seventeenth-century women Chan masters saw themselves not just as disciples but as heirs and leaders within the Linji tradition. But gender continued to be a marker of their identity (p. 30). While they wrote and spoke like their male counterparts, they identified themselves with past exemplary women Chan masters like Miaozong, displaying an acute awareness of the ambivalence of their gendered status as Chan masters. I would suggest that by establishing themselves as masters and identifying themselves with female disciples of previous eras, they in fact elevated the status of these earlier disciples and offered an alternative to the male-centered narrative of the Linji tradition.

The book touches on much more than just the stories of these women Chan masters, and there are a few threads that could be followed up. For example, Grant does not focus on the chaotic fall of the Ming dynasty and rise of the Qing, but she does provide many stories of lay Buddhist patrons and
relatives who were Ming loyalists supporting these woman Chan masters in various capacities. How did such connections affect the lives or the writings of these nuns? In addition, we got a glimpse of how family networks, native-place identity and lineage relations worked to the advantage of these woman Chan masters in their work and travels. How would these relations differ from those of other elite women in the same period? On a different note, Grant's book reassesses Timothy Brook's claim that “monastic patronage... tended to be a male activity” (p. 187). Through these women Chan masters, we learn about the initiatives of other women disciples, both lay and religious, and women patrons. These women actively pursued their interests in Chan enlightenment and supported religious activities but seem to have left no writings of their own. Can a history be written about those women? By drawing our attention to these seven women in a sea of men, our current understanding of the Chan tradition and women’s history of the period should certainly change.

Grant’s book is timely as scholars working in the area of Chan Buddhism in the seventeenth century have recently published their findings. Dai Lianbin’s article on the publishing history of the Jiaxing canon, Wu Jiang’s book on the revival and subsequent demise of Chan Buddhism in the seventeenth century, and Albert Welter’s work that studies the formation of the yulu and the records of Linji, all complement this study. Grant has also placed her work alongside key studies by scholars such as Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer on the history of women who wrote in premodern China. A chart plotting the various Chan lineages and a glossary with Chinese characters would have improved the readability of the text.

(Margaret Wee-Siang Ng, McGill University, Montreal)

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