Da Zhangfu: The Gendered Rhetoric of Heroism and Equality in Seventeenth-Century Chan Buddhist Discourse Records*

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Abstract
This article looks at some of the different ways in which the use of the term “da zhangfu” or “great gentleman” is exercised in the writings of seventeenth-century Buddhist monks and laymen in reference to religious women. These uses reflect a wide range of opinion on the question of whether or not women had the strength and determination to embark on the Chan Buddhist path of spiritual training. The attitudes expressed by these male writers range from undisguised disapproval to qualified skepticism to wholehearted support and admiration. Regarded as a whole, they reflect the ongoing ambivalence towards religious women as well as the unquestionable changes in attitude, that marked the seventeenth-century.

Keywords
Buddhist laywomen, Buddhist nuns, rhetoric of heroism, honorary males, discourse records

Introduction
Sometime around 1676, a young Japanese woman of noble birth took the tonsure at a Linji (Rinzai) temple and became the nun Ryōnen 了然 (1646-1711). In 1678, she went to Edo to find a master with whom to study at the new Obaku (Huangbo 黃檗) school of Zen Buddhism, which had been recently brought to Japan by Chinese...
masters. She visited one Japanese Obaku master and was turned away. She then went to Hakuō Dōtai 白翁道泰 (d. 1682), a Japanese Dharma heir of the Chinese Obaku master, Mu’an Xingtao 木菴性滔 (1611-84) and again was turned away because, we are told, of her great beauty. Determined to fulfill her goal of entering the religious life, Ryônen pressed a burning iron into her face, leaving it greatly disfigured. Hakuō was so shocked—and impressed—that he accepted her as his disciple, and four years later she received his Dharma transmission and eventually went on to establish a convent of her own. “There was nothing particularly Japanese or even Buddhist about this mind-set,” comments Barbara Ruch, “the crux of it runs blatantly and constantly through the anxieties of almost all of the male leaders and formulators of doctrine of the world’s major religions. Neither Obaku Zen monks nor practitioners were unique in this regard.”

Ruch is correct in noting that this particular misogynist mindset is by no means unique to either Japan or Buddhism. In China, for example, there is the story of the famous Daoist woman practitioner, Sun Bu’er 孫不二, who is said to have disfigured her face in order to travel unmolested. And, as anyone who has read anything about the history of women in imperial China knows, there are many accounts of virtuous Chinese ladies who mutilated or killed themselves rather than put their chastity in jeopardy. As far as I know, however, there are relatively few records of Buddhist women in China who mutilated themselves in order to gain admittance to the religious life, although many did indeed threaten to fast until death. This is not to say that mutilation is any worse than attempted suicide, but rather to point out that, at least in the Chinese Buddhist discourse record texts (yulu 語錄) that are the focus of the present article, it was usually not the feminine appearance, with its potential to arouse lust and desire in others, that seemed to be the problem, but rather the feminine character, which was deemed to be too emotional and weak to undergo and sustain the arduous discipline required of a Chan Buddhist monastic practitioner. In fact, only the

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2) Discourse records are collections of Dharma talks, letters, poems, and other writings of Chan Buddhist masters, often collected and printed by the master’s disciples after his or her