

An Overview of Buddhist Precepts in Taiwan and Mainland China

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Abstract

In Buddhism, monastic disciplinary texts embody the ideal of how followers should regulate their daily lives, and Buddhist monks and nuns are required to observe Buddhist precepts that were compiled nearly 2,500 years ago in India, a context dramatically different from contemporary monastic conditions. This study explores how Buddhist nuns in two widely divergent Chinese socio-cultural contexts experience the observance of Vinaya precepts that originated in India. The first section summarises female practitioners' general perceptions of Buddhist precepts. Then certain monastic rules are selected for more in-depth discussion. By juxtaposing the perceptions of nuns from these two Chinese regions, I have identified similarities as well as differences between them, and among the various institutions involved. This research thus provides a detailed overview, based on a cross-regional empirical study, of nuns' perceptions of whether there is a disjunction between ideal monastic life as regulated by Vinaya and the way nuns in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism actually live.

Introduction

In Buddhism, monastic rules embody the ideal of how followers should regulate their daily lives, and Buddhist monks and nuns are required to observe precepts established nearly two thousand five hundred years ago. A saying recorded in the *Sifen lü shanfan buque xingshi chao* 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔, one of the most important commentaries by Master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667),¹ illustrates the pivotal role that monastic rules play: “The *Vinaya Piṭaka* is about the lifespan of the Buddhist *Dharma*; as long as the *Vinaya Piṭaka* exists, the *Dharma* exists.”² Similar comments have been made by numerous modern scholars. As Michael Carrithers puts it, there is “[n]o Buddhism without the Sangha, and no Sangha without the Discipline” (1984: 133). However, it is important to bear in mind that the Buddhist precepts were compiled in Ancient India, a context dramatically different from contemporary Chinese monastic conditions. Stuart Chandler reminds us that not many monastic members, in any Buddhist tradition, are doing exactly at all times what the *Vinaya* requires (2004: 165).

Indeed, some great Chinese masters have expressed their reflections on the difficulties of observing (some) Buddhist precepts to the letter, as commented on by Master Zhumo 竺摩 in the preface to Shih Sheng Yen’s classic book *Jielü xue gangyao* 戒律學綱要 (Essentials of the Study of Buddhist Discipline).³ In this preface, Zhumo first takes Master Hongyi as an example.⁴ While Hongyi was renowned for his *Vinaya* study and strict observance of monastic rules, he did not consider himself fit to be a *bhikṣu*, a *śrāmaṇera* or even an *upāsaka* (layman) because, after closely examining his practice when following the rules, he realised that he could not observe the five precepts to the letter (Cai, 1976: 1603; Shih Sheng Yen, 1997: 3). Similarly, a famous Ming Dynasty monk also

¹ As a rule, most books and articles today use the *pinyin* system to transcribe Chinese names and terms. I have done the same throughout this article. Nevertheless, when referring to Taiwanese authors, I have opted to use their personal romanization, as it appears in their publications.

² T40.n1804, p50b18–19.

³ Zhumo 竺摩 (1913–2002) was Ven. Taixu’s highly accomplished disciple, skilled in poetical work, prose, and painting. He advocated Buddhism in Hong Kong before the War of Resistance against Japan. In 1953, he moved to Malaysia for the promotion of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhist education.

⁴ Ven. Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942) was a famous Chinese Buddhist monk who deeply researched *Vinaya* and promoted the strict observance of monastic rules. For a detailed introduction, see Birnbaum (2003: 75–124).

referred to by Zhumo, Master Zibo 紫柏,⁵ was said to meditate alone throughout the night and to never have lain down to sleep on a bed as an ascetic practice for more than forty years; nevertheless, he would not confer *bhikṣu* and *śrāmaṇera* precepts upon young monks because he considered that he had failed to follow some minor rules (Cai, 1976: 1461; Shih Sheng Yen, 1997: 3). To some extent, then, we can infer how difficult it is to strictly observe monastic rules from the cases of Hongyi and Zibo, who are both regarded as eminent masters in the history of Chinese Buddhism for their religious devotion. It is worth noting that, despite the following of all rules being difficult or even impossible, Master Zhumo still suggests that monastic members should try their best to do so (ibid: 4).⁶

As aptly argued by Chandler, there are four general causes for the many differences that exist between the ideal theory (the precepts) and actual practice of monastic life:

Some precepts have long been incompatible with the mores of particular indigenous cultures; others have no significance in particular social contexts; sometimes the *Vinaya* does not cover the needs of particular monasteries; and, finally, some precepts are at odds with important strands of twentieth-century thought. (2004: 166)

Chandler introduces various examples to demonstrate how some *Vinaya* rules are, in his estimation, irrelevant to or incompatible with the current life of monastic members in Chinese contexts. These include the precepts against handling money, fasting after midday, digging the land, and so on (ibid: 166–167). Chandler’s stance on Chinese Buddhists’ precept observance more or less corresponds to Holmes Welch’s:

⁵ Ven. Zibo 紫柏 (1543–1603) is regarded as one of the four great masters of the Ming dynasty.

⁶ The claim that it is difficult to observe precepts to the letter is also voiced by some monastic members in the Theravāda tradition. Some nuns in Thailand and Sri Lanka were unwilling to receive full ordination because of the difficulty of strict adherence to monastic rules. Lindberg Falk investigated *maechis*’ views of the re-establishment of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Thai Buddhism and found that some chose to continue as a *maechi* rather than become a *bhikṣuṇī*, because “[m]ost Thai nuns are scrupulous about following the precepts and they anticipate difficulties in maintaining the more than three hundred precepts needed for full ordination, some of which are outmoded and therefore hard to follow today” (2000: 47). Similarly, a ten-precept Sri Lankan female monastic disapproved of receiving full ordination, because “it was impossible to observe all the 311 [*bhikṣuṇī*] precepts” (Cheng, 2007: 170).

[H]ow closely was it [Buddhist law] followed [by Chinese monks]? We know that much of it was ignored. The Pratimoksa, for example, includes vows not to handle gold, silver, or copper; to bathe no more than twice a month... These vows were accepted by Chinese monks but regularly violated[.] (1967: 105–106)

These remarks imply that Chinese monastics often do not strictly apply Buddhist law.⁷ In this context, some scholars indicate that Theravāda monastic members appear to have a broadly negative impression of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists with regard to the latter group's observance of *Vinaya* rules. For instance, Richard Gombrich (1988: 12) has noted that monastic members in the Mahāyāna tradition were mistrusted by Theravāda Buddhists for not observing monastic rules strictly. Fieldwork by Gombrich and Obeyesekere, meanwhile, reported that “most Sinhala Buddhists — including most nuns we have spoken to ... believe that the *bhikṣuṇī-sangha* in Mahāyāna countries is corrupt” (1988: 274). A Sri Lankan informant nun interviewed by Wei-Yi Cheng said that “Mahāyāna monastics do not observe precepts strictly” (2007: 180); while Hiroko Kawanami found that some nuns in Myanmar “did not relish the possibility of ‘Mahāyāna’ influence on their religious practice, as it was considered that they were lax in discipline” (2007: 238). These examples raise a number of significant questions. Do Chinese monks and nuns acknowledge the accusation of being “lax in discipline” that is so often levelled at them by Theravāda Buddhists? What does ‘laxity in discipline’ actually mean? Regardless of the answer to the preceding question, which cultural and social factors influence Chinese Mahāyāna monastics’ practice of the precepts? What difficulties do they encounter when observing *Vinaya*?⁸ How have they adapted the precepts in, or for, modern times? These questions should be borne in mind when embarking upon any examination of current Chinese nuns’ perspectives. Therefore the purpose of this research is to explore what interpretations and practices of

⁷ Welch’s judgment seems to be both unsound and simplistic. Take, for instance, the rule about bathing: a Buddhist monk or nun is allowed under certain circumstances to bathe more than twice a month. These not very special circumstances include when the weather is hot, very windy or rainy; and when the monastic member is ill, working, or travelling long distances. For a detailed discussion on bathing practice and *Vinaya*, see Heirman and Torck (2012: 27–66).

⁸ This study particularly focuses on the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (*Sifen lü* 四分律 T.1428) since, due largely to its strong promotion by Master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), it has become a major reference point for monastic discipline in China. For the historical background and subsequent development of the *Dharmaguptaka* tradition, see Heirman (2002: 11–61).

traditional precepts are applied by Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* in the modern world. It is hoped that this exploration will provide a clearer understanding of how nuns in Chinese social-cultural contexts experience the observance of *Vinaya* precepts which originated in India, and, on a broader level, whether in their perception there is a disjunction between ideal monastic life as regulated by *Vinaya* and the way nuns in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism actually live. While *Vinaya* has been extensively studied in recent years, this study offers a more comprehensive overview and comparison by discussing fieldwork data firsthand from various nunneries across different regions, exploring similarities and differences in their viewpoints and actual practices. Due to the time constraints of conducting interviews with my informant nuns and the relatively limited scope of the paper, it will not be possible to discuss the complete list of *bhikṣuṇī* precepts in detail. However, before commencing fieldwork, I selected certain monastic rules for particular attention, on the grounds that these rules have attracted considerable interest among academics and/or are considered especially difficult to observe by monastic members in modern contexts.

Taiwan and Mainland China each have a rich monastic scene, but it is difficult or impossible to conduct fieldwork in all monastic institutions. It is, however, crucial to select purposive samples of specific Buddhist institutions to provide variety and a balanced overview. The nunneries have been carefully selected so as to encompass the major different types in the Chinese context, each with their own representative characteristics and attitude towards disciplinary rules:

1. *Vinaya*-centric institutes, such as Nanlin Nisengyuan⁹ (Nantou,

⁹ Nanlin Nunnery 南林尼僧苑 was founded in 1982. There are about 70 resident nuns. Its name ‘Nanlin’ 南林, Southern Grove, is highly symbolic. It is taken from the name of the monastery where, according to the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (‘Biographies of Nuns’), a compilation of biographies of Buddhist nuns traditionally attributed to the monk Baochang (ca.466–?), a second ordination ceremony for Chinese nuns was held in c. 433 (T50.n2063, p939c21–c24): more than 300 women received full ordination from a dual *samgha* with the help of a quorum of Sinhalese nuns. The name clearly indicates how Nanlin Nunnery sees itself as part of a development relating back to India and to the first (lawful) dual ordinations of medieval China. It also demonstrates its reliance on a strict observance of the *Vinaya*. As already noted by Li Yu-Chen, numerous young nuns regard Nanlin Nunnery’s strict training and ascetic lifestyle highly, seen as a ‘symbolic revitalization of the [*bhikṣuṇī*] vinaya’ (2000: 153)

Taiwan), and Pushou Si¹⁰ (Wutaishan, Mainland China).¹¹

2. Buddhist nuns' colleges, such as Dingguang Si¹² (Guangdong, Mainland China), Chongfu Si¹³ (Fuzhou, Mainland China), Zizhulin¹⁴ (Xiamen, Mainland China), Qifu Si¹⁵ (Chengdu, Mainland China), and Xiangguang Si¹⁶ (= Luminary Nunnery) (Chiayi, Taiwan).

¹⁰ Pushou Si 普壽寺, started to rebuild in 1991. Located in Shanxi Province, it is a well-known *Vinaya*-centric monastery and now the largest Buddhist nuns' college in China (around 1,000 nuns), with a tradition of training *śrāmaṇerī* (novice) as *śikṣamāṇā* (probationer) before *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, and offering various *Vinaya* study programs.

¹¹ In this study, '*Vinaya*-centric' institutions are defined as those whose members eagerly follow rigorous interpretation and practice of traditional *Vinaya* rules to the letter, as a priority of their religious lives. These monasteries rigidly observe some rules (e.g. the *gurudharmas*, not touching money, and fasting after midday) that others might treat more flexibly. However, it would be wrong to assume that other monasteries outside the category of '*Vinaya*-centric' institutions are lax in discipline or not based on *Vinaya*. Each has its own representative characteristics and different foci in its religious practices (see further analysis).

¹² Dingguang Si 定光寺, located in Guangdong Province, opened as a Buddhist College with Master Honghui as dean in 1996. It was then promoted to the status of Guangdong Buddhist Nuns' College, the first of its kind in the Buddhist history of Guangdong. The college currently has around 300 student nuns and twenty teacher nuns.

¹³ Chongfu Si 崇福寺, located in Fujian Province, is a well-known site for nuns' Buddhist spiritual practice, and Fujian Buddhist College for nuns was established in the temple in 1983. Currently, Chongfu Temple is the cradle for the cultivation of a new generation of Buddhist nuns and one of Mainland China's most famous Buddhist monastic institutions to confer ordination. Ca. 300 nuns live and undertake Buddhist study and practice there.

¹⁴ Zizhulin 紫竹林, also located in Fujian Province, belongs to Minnan Buddhist College, which is a well-known institution of higher Buddhist learning in Mainland China. Zizhulin Temple became Minnan Buddhist College for female monastic members in 1995; currently, around 200 nuns live and undertake Buddhist study and practice there.

¹⁵ Qifu Si 祈福寺 is famous for its nuns' education, and is also known as Sichuan Buddhist Higher Institute for *Bhikṣuṇīs* 四川尼眾佛學院 (formerly located in Tiexiang Si nunnery, also in Sichuan). The previous abbess, Ven. Longlian 隆蓮 (1909–2006), played a key role in shaping contemporary Chinese nuns' views on, and practice of, monastic rules. She devoted herself to the education of Buddhist nuns for many years. Student nuns in this institute receive the *śrāmaṇerī* and *śikṣamāṇā* precepts and are required to strictly observe Buddhist rules and lawfully follow the Buddhist ceremonies of *poṣadha* (recitation of precepts), *varṣā* (summer retreat), and *pravāraṇā* (invitation ceremony held at the end of summer retreat). The college currently has more than 100 female monastic members (including teacher and students nuns).

¹⁶ Luminary Nunnery 香光寺 (also Luminary Buddhist Institute) was founded in 1980 by the nun Wu Yin (b.1940). It currently has approximately 120 nuns. Master Wu Yin, who is well known for her research on *Vinaya*, runs a Buddhist College that provides education for nuns.

3. Humanistic Buddhist institutes,¹⁷ such as *Fagushan*/Dharma Drum Mountain¹⁸ (Taipei, Taiwan), and *Foguangshan*¹⁹ (Kaohsiung, Taiwan).
4. A non-specific remainder of institutes, such as Tongjiao Si²⁰ and Tianning Si²¹ (both in Beijing, Mainland China).

The research was undertaken via interviews and fieldwork observation, supplemented by the writings of contemporary nuns and monks. A total of 35 face-to-face interviews were conducted in four Taiwanese and seven Mainland Chinese monastic institutions, with 15 of the interviews taking place in Taiwan and 20 on the Mainland.²² Analysis and interpretation were applied to nuns' interview responses and to their independently expressed views on *Vinaya* rules.

This research paper is divided into four parts. The first part discusses practitioners' general views on *Vinaya* rules. Part two explores nuns' attitudes in relation to the number of *bhikṣuṇī* precepts, an often debated issue. The third part

¹⁷ Humanistic Buddhism encourages Buddhist monks and nuns to interact closely with the wider community. Some leading contemporary masters in Taiwan – such as the late Sheng Yen (Fagushan) and Hsing Yun (Foguangshan) – advocate Humanistic Buddhism through various objectives and activities, including monastic and secular education, welfare work and environmental protection.

¹⁸ Dharma Drum Mountain (*Fagushan* 法鼓山, abbreviated as DDM) is one of the largest Buddhist institutions in Taiwan, currently with about fifty monks and 200 nuns affiliated to the monastery. It was founded by the monk Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1930–2009), a prominent Chan master.

¹⁹ *Foguangshan* 佛光山, recognised as one of the three largest monastic institutions in Taiwan, was founded by the monk Hsing Yun 星雲 (b. 1927) in 1967. There are more than 1,000 monastic members (of both genders) affiliated to this monastery, which promotes Humanistic Buddhism in particular.

²⁰ Tongjiao Si 通教寺 is a well-known and highly respected Beijing nunnery, whose members focus on *Vinaya* study. Ven. Longlian 隆蓮 studied Buddhism in Tongjiao Si. It is now a place for Buddhist nuns' religious practice and study, holding the Seven-day Recitation of the Buddha's Name every month. Ca. thirty nuns live in the nunnery.

²¹ Tianning Si 天寧寺, also located in Beijing, is one of the earliest temples there, and is famous for its twelfth-century Liao Dynasty pagoda. In 1988, Tianning Si became one of the most important national cultural relic protection units. Currently around thirty Buddhist nuns reside in this nunnery, which focuses on the combined practice of Chan and Pure Land methods. Ca. thirty nuns live in the nunnery.

²² Taiwan (total of 15 interviewees): Nanlin Nunnery (2 interviewees); Luminary Nunnery (8); Dharma Drum Mountain (3) and Foguangshan (2). Mainland China (total of 20 interviewees): Pushou Si (5); Tongjiao Si (2); Tianning Si (2); Dingguang Si (4); Chongfu Si (3); Zizhulin (2) and Qifu Si (2).

focuses specifically on one *bhikṣunī* precept (the seventh *saṃghāvaśeṣa*), which only applies to nuns and thus serves as an exemplary precept that illuminates the particular situation of nuns. Finally, in the fourth part of the study, two ‘impractical’ precepts (the use of a chamber pot and food kept overnight) are chosen to investigate how nuns interpret and deal with them in modern contexts.

2. General Viewpoint on Buddhist Precepts

This section summarises Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese nuns’ general perceptions of Buddhist precepts as observed in contemporary society. By juxtaposing the perceptions of nuns from these two Chinese regions, I hope to identify similarities as well as differences between them, and between the various institutions involved. To this end, six distinct issues are categorised as these are often mentioned or emphasised by my informant nuns while discussing *Vinaya*: (1) Laity should not read *Vinaya*; (2) Understanding the spirit and background of each precept; (3) Observance of rules is flexible; (4) *Vinaya* adapted by local communities; (5) Application and reinterpretation of *Vinaya* in modern times and (6) Effects of institutional type on the manner of practising rules.

2.1 Laity Should Not Read *Vinaya*

During my fieldwork in Mainland China and Taiwan, nearly all my informant nuns repeatedly stressed that laypeople are generally not allowed to read the content of Buddhist precepts for *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣunīs*. Though it exists everywhere, this consensus appears particularly strong among those monastics who adhere to these rules most strictly. In certain Buddhist canons, laypeople and monastic members who have not yet received full ordination should not read *Vinaya* rules.²³ Buddhist monks commit an “infringement of the *Vinaya*” (*vinayātikrama* 越毗尼) if they discuss *bhikṣus*’ *niḥsargika pācittika*²⁴ and

²³ For instance: the *Mūlasarvāstivādivinaya* (T23.n1442, p672c4–c05: *Vinayapiṭaka* is for monastics’ rules, lay people should not hear it); the *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (*Treatise on Analysing Merit*), a commentary on the *Ekottarāgama*, traditionally said to have been translated into Chinese in the Later Han (25–220 CE) dynasty (T25.n1507, p32a14–a15: *Vinayapiṭaka* should not be heard or seen by novices or laypeople); or the *Da zhi du lun* 大智度論, *Mahāprajñāparamitāśāstra*, attributed to Nāgārjuna and said to have been translated (or compiled) by Kumārajīva in the Later Qin (384–417) dynasty (cf. Williams, 1989:74–75) (T25.n1509, p66a12–a13: *Vinayapiṭaka* should not be heard by laypeople).

²⁴ A *niḥsargika pācittika* is an offence that concerns an unlawfully obtained object that needs to be given up. For details, see Heirman (2002: 138–141).

*pācittika*²⁵ rules with people who have not yet received full ordination; similar discussion of *bhikṣuṇīs' pārājika*²⁶ and *saṃghāvaśeṣa*²⁷ rules is considered a *sthūlātyaya*²⁸ offence (T22.n1425, p338a22–29).

Being a scholar, not a Buddhist nun, I have thus inevitably encountered various data-collection difficulties. The majority of my interviewees in Mainland China were initially reluctant or unwilling to talk about *Vinaya* rules.²⁹ While nuns in Taiwan appear to enjoy more freedom and a more open environment than those in Mainland China, as DeVido claims (2010: 7), most Taiwanese nuns I interviewed were as opposed to *Vinaya* rules being read by laypeople as their Mainland counterparts were. At the start of my fieldwork in Taiwan, a few nuns at first agreed to be interviewed but withdrew when they heard that my research questions were about *Vinaya* rules. A nun at Nanlin (a *Vinaya*-centric nunnery) finally accepted my request to interview her, but suspended the session prematurely, citing her belief that monastics should not talk about *Vinaya* to laypeople. If I had any questions about the *Vinaya*, she said, I would have to read it for myself to find the answers.

Nuns at Pushou Si, Dingguang Si, and Chongfu Si took an even stronger view, explaining that *Vinaya* should not be read or researched by laypeople. In their views, nuns and monks are ordinary people who, though on a religious path, have not yet attained enlightenment. If (lay)people were to read monastic rules, they might “misinterpret” monastic members’ behaviour as not being in accordance with Buddhist rules, and criticise them inappropriately, speaking negatively about them and accruing bad karma. My informant from Foguangshan even strongly questioned some laypeople’s and researchers’ purposes in reading *Vinaya*. In her opinion, certain non-monastic readers merely wanted to use Buddhist rules to criticise monastics, or perhaps wished to see them break the precepts. It was clear that, on this matter, Taiwanese and Chinese nuns shared

²⁵ A *pācittika* is a minor offence that needs to be expiated. For details, see Heirman (2002: 141–147).

²⁶ A *pārājika* offence is regarded as the most serious transgression “as if one cuts off someone’s head and he cannot stand up again” (Heirman, 2002: 244). For details, see Heirman (2002: 119–127).

²⁷ A *saṃghāvaśeṣa* offence is an offence that leads to a temporary exclusion from the main activities of the community. For details, see Heirman (2002: 128–138).

²⁸ A *sthūlātyaya* offence is a serious transgression close to a *pārājika* or a *saṃghāvaśeṣa* offense. For details, see Heirman (2002: 158–160).

²⁹ In order to build nuns’ trust to ensure the success of the interviews and obtain important data, I first needed to introduce myself, explaining that I come from a Buddhist family, and that my mother has received lay *Bodhisattva* precepts. Only then did they consent to share their views about Buddhist precepts.

a similar consensus that too much familiarity with monastic rules among laypeople was harmful.

2.2 Understanding the Spirit (*Jingshen* 精神) and Background of Each Precept

My informant nuns from various institutions in Mainland China all emphasised that one needs to understand the spirit and background of each precept while observing it. In this context, two teacher nuns explained their methods of teaching Buddhist precepts to student nuns. One, from Dingguang Si, stressed that monastic members needed to understand the spirit of Buddhist rules while practising them. The other, from Zizhulin, said she taught her students to underline the connection between the precepts and religious practice: “First of all, we (teacher nuns) stress the importance of *Vinaya* since each precept has its function(s). In Buddhism, to achieve *nirvāṇa* for yourself and sentient beings, you must protect and obey precepts.” In her view, once students understood the cause-and-effect background of precepts, they spontaneously followed these rules rather than being forced to. Stretching this idea somewhat further, a nun from Qifu Si told me that as long as nuns understood the spirit of rules when practising Buddhism, and contributed to their fellow human beings and to society, then they would not really be disobeying the precepts. One Pushou nun told me that monastic members needed to see the essence of *Vinaya* to extend the meaning of its rules. Following the rules reminded her to think whether her behaviour might cause accidents or annoyance to other people. The *Vinaya* rules the Buddha established can thus be applied, by extension, to similar cases to which monastic members therefore need to pay attention. In this context, the rule on the chamber pot cited by the nun is a good example.³⁰ Although the chamber pot is currently no longer used by most of monastic members, the rule can still be valued: it is important to behave well; less educated people might throw things out of a window or building.

In a similar vein, my Taiwanese informant nuns from Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM), Luminary Nunnery and Foguangshan all stressed the importance of understanding the historical origins of the precepts, so that they could see the Buddha’s real purpose, learn the spirit of precepts, and adapt these rules to the modern environment. The nun from Foguangshan

³⁰ According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, “If a *bhikṣuṇī*, at night, relieves herself in a pot, and if, in the daytime, she throws it over the wall without looking, she [commits] a *pācittika*” (translated in Heirman, 2002: 608).

even explicitly stated that scholars often made the mistake of reading *Vinaya* too literally and superficially, just examining the letter of the precepts. She used as an example the rule against nuns eating garlic,³¹ and asked: would the *Vinaya* have forbidden nuns from eating apples, if the nuns in the story had picked all the apples rather than digging up all the garlic?³² In her opinion, there was no intrinsic fault in either apples or garlic;³³ rather, the spirit of this rule was that monastic members should be aware of and concerned about their lay supporters' economic conditions. The nun gave a further, extensive explanation of the precept's spirit in the modern context: a layman promised to donate \$100 to her as support every month, which was acceptable; but she would transgress the precept against eating garlic if she asked the layman to give her \$30,000, leaving him no money for himself.

As is clear from the above, a consensus on the importance of understanding the background and spirit of Buddhist precepts could be discerned among my informant nuns from both Mainland China and Taiwan. More specifically, this held that monastic members living in modern contexts are aware of religiously appropriate ways of dealing with situations that may not be covered by the 348 *bhikṣuṇī* precepts.³⁴ This is achieved by extending the meaning and applying the spirit of certain rules in their religious life.

³¹ T22n.1428, p0736c04–p0737b15. The *bhikṣuṇīs*, probationers and novices dug up all of a layman's garlic, so that nothing was left. These female practitioners' behaviour caused damage to the benefactor's economic interest. Therefore the Buddha asked nuns not to eat garlic. However, it is worth noting that monks in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* and other *Vinayas* (e.g. *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*, *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya* and Pāli *Vinaya*) are forbidden to eat garlic due to the bad smell it produces, unless there are medical reasons (T22n.1428, p0956b14–b19).

In addition to the *Vinaya* rules, Chinese monks and nuns in the Mahāyāna tradition also should observe *bodhisattva* precepts based on the *Fanwang jing* 梵網經 (The Brahmā's Net Sūtra) or the *Pusa jie ben* 菩薩戒本 (The Bodhisattva-sīla sūtra). According to one precept in the *Fanwang jing* (T24n.1484, p1005b14–b16), Chinese monastic members are not allowed to eat garlic, categorised as the "five pungent plants" (*wuxin* 五辛). For details see Kieschnick (2005: 191–192) and Heirman and De Rauw (2006: 61–64).

³² This informant nun's viewpoint partly echoes Heirman's comment on the prohibition against garlic eating: "This explanation is somehow strange, since it could just as well be applied to every product nuns like to eat" (Heirman and De Rauw, 2006: 62)".

³³ The informant nun's main point of this precept is not to be greedy when receiving donations from the laity.

³⁴ For concrete examples, see further section 2.5: Application and Reinterpretation of *Vinaya* in Modern Times.

2.3 Observance of Rules is Flexible, not Rigid

When I asked my informant nuns how they generally felt about observing rules, they responded in a similar fashion. A nun from Pushou Si indicated that the way to observe rules is smooth, not a rigid adherence to what the Buddha said. In her opinion, it was necessary for Buddhists to follow rules according to particular circumstances: each monastic should observe each rule that is applicable to their current circumstance, and keep that rule in mind even if it is not applicable in all situations. In the future, you may need to observe it again, depending on the conditions you encounter.

A nun from Tongjiao Si provided me with a lively explanation of this point. She stressed that monastic members needed to understand clearly what was allowable and what was prohibited, and also know the conditions under which something would be an exception to these rules, and when it was a violation of the *Vinaya*. So on this principle, monastic members learned that the precepts are flexible rather than rigid. The nun interestingly referred to some colleagues as “Buddhist precept-worms” (cf. “bookworm”), because they did not dare to do this or that, restraining themselves more than was really necessary. She thought the *Vinaya* was not so rigid, and so long as you really understood the precepts you could practise well. She further compared the Buddhist *Vinaya* to national laws, insofar as people do not have to be constrained as long as they do not violate the law. If people wonder why the law, or precepts, are controlling them, it means they are restricting themselves internally. One teacher nun from Chongfu Si said she instructed her students that each precept had its background and meaning, and taught them not to consider Buddhist precepts as restricting their religious life. A nun from Qifu Si expressed an opinion similar to that of the Tongjiao nun: the Buddha established the monastic rules as a guide, and made Buddhist precepts quite flexible; so monastic members could do or not do something, depending on certain conditions and exceptions.

In Taiwan, the DDM nun told me that Buddhist precepts and monastery regulations have fitted into her daily life without causing her to feel restricted by rigid rules. This was because of the influence of Ven. Sheng Yen, who emphasised that obedience to rules should be underpinned by having correct concepts. Similarly, one nun from Luminary told me that nuns there applied precepts to their daily lives practically rather than literally. Everything, including getting along with other people in community life and work, involved precepts. This informant told me that Master Wu Yin (the abbess of this nunnery) disapproved

of those who observed precepts rigidly without balancing this against how to relate to others appropriately. In Wu Yin's opinion, cultivation of the mind and religious practice should keep abreast of each other. From this it would appear that integrating Buddhist precepts with monastic daily life was considered crucial by at least two institutional leaders who played key roles in influencing the manner of observing precepts among their disciples.

2.4 *Vinaya* Adapted by Local Communities

One nun from Pushou Si indicated that the principle of *Vinaya* "is in accordance with the region where it is applied" (隨方毘尼),³⁵ therefore Buddhist monks and nuns should not break local lay customs even though the Buddha did not lay down any rule specifically requiring this. The nun took smoking³⁶ as an example: many people smoke, but it is unsuitable for Buddhist monastic members to do so. There is no rule forbidding monks and nuns from smoking, but smoking may attract laypeople's criticism or annoy them, which in this nun's opinion is detrimental to Buddhism. Similarly, a nun from Zizhulin explained that monastic members must follow certain rules to avoid criticism, even though the Buddha did not establish them. She also took smoking as an example, for the same reason, but made a further argument regarding the different customs or traditions that exist in different Buddhist communities. For example, in Theravāda communities, monks do not eat after midday, but eat meat without attracting criticism. In China, by contrast, the precept against eating in the afternoon was flexibly observed,³⁷ but monastic members attract severe criticism if they eat meat,³⁸ since from a Chinese point of view doing so offends against the core Buddhist precept against killing.

My informant nun from Nanlin Nunnery in Taiwan also stated the principle that *Vinaya* rules are adjusted "in accordance with the region", but considered

³⁵ This concept is applied in early Chinese Buddhism allowing more flexibility in *Vinaya* matters. For details, see *Fo guang da ci dian* (1988: 6345) and Heirman (2008a: 265).

³⁶ According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, smoking is allowed for medical purposes (T22. n1428, p877a12–a19).

³⁷ For a detailed discussion on the precept of fasting in contemporary Chinese Buddhism, see Chiu (2015: 57–89).

³⁸ Abstaining from all meat and fish as part of a lifelong vegetarian diet has become a major characteristic of Chinese monastic life. For details see Kieschnick (2005: 193–202) and Heirman and De Rauw (2006: 60–64).

that Buddhist robes should not vary in this way, because in her opinion the Buddha's rules about robe-wearing had clear causes and reasons. She even suggested that Buddhist robes should be standardised across the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions, because the principles of making robes set forth in all versions of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* are the same. This same informant nun told me that she knew her institution's robes differed from those of other Taiwanese nunneries in both colour and style (see Figures 1 and 2), and she also said that her colleagues and she did not fear criticism for this, because in their view they were following and expressing the reality of Dharma and *Vinaya*.



Figure 1. Nanlin nuns' robes



Figure 2. Nanlin nuns' daily dressing style

In sharp contrast to this plea for standardisation, Master Wu Yin, the abbess of Luminary nunnery, explicitly defended changes to the styles and colours of monastic robes to fit Chinese culture:

For example, having bare arms was considered impolite, so Chinese monastic members wore garments with sleeves. Since only the emperor was allowed to wear gold-colored garments, and bright colors did not seem fitting for renunciants in China, the color of the robes was changed to black and gray. (2001: 264)

This suggests a division between Nanlin and Luminary on whether robes should be adapted in accordance with the local customs, with the former emphasising the importance of strictly following the original style required in the *Vinaya*, and the latter embracing the principle of adaption to local cultural conditions.³⁹ On a broader level, the statements cited above reveal different perceptions of the principle of adjusting *Vinaya* rules regionally.

2.5 Application and Reinterpretation of Vinaya in Modern Times

Despite the flexibility we have noticed above, it is rather interesting that none of my Mainland informant nuns said that ancient Indian Buddhist rules were out of date or impractical in modern times;⁴⁰ rather, they stressed the Buddha's great wisdom in establishing rules for his disciples. For example, a nun from Pushou Si told me that the Buddha laid down the *Vinaya* rules not only for his followers in his time, but also for future followers, because he foresaw what offences his disciples might commit. The *Vinaya* rules have remained the same throughout history, she added, and will remain unchanged in the future; the Buddha never stated which rules were not applicable in modern times.

A nun from Chongfu Si said that monastic members should conduct self-examinations with a mind of shame if they could not obey certain rules because of conditions and their bad *karma*, rather than claim that the Buddha's precepts

³⁹ An in depth discussion of the style of monastic robes in China is beyond the scope of this research. For the discussion of *bhikṣuṇīs*' robes, see Heirman (2008b: 145–158). For a study on the robes of the Chinese Buddhist community, see Kuo (2001). For a discussion on redesigned monastic vestments by Taixu, see for example Pittman (2001: 232n87). For the debate about the reform of monastic robes since the early Republican period, see (Qingde Shi, 2001: 197–200).

⁴⁰ Ven. Yifa was said to have advanced thought of reforming and updating the *Vinaya* to fit modern contexts, while other Foguangshan monastic members were discomfited by Yifa's radical claims (Chandler, 2004:167).

are impractical. She stressed that it was inappropriate for a person to deny the Buddha's rules just because he or she could not follow them. One nun from Zizhulin explicitly stated that the precepts have never become outdated, as their main function is to regulate the vexations that distract monastic members. She speculated that those who feel monastic rules are outmoded may not truly want enlightenment.

The Zizhulin nun used an additional example to support her viewpoint, citing the great grasslands of Mongolia and the ocean near Xiamen. She said: "The maritime law of a nation does not apply in Mongolia, but this does not prove that the law is out of date or ineffectual. When you go to Mongolia, you don't offend maritime law, because you do not need to observe it there. In the same way, the grassland law cannot be practised in Xiamen. Is the law behind the times?"

In Taiwan, my DDM informant said that monastic members in Fagushan were not like Buddhists in Theravāda Buddhism, who practised the precepts to the letter. Interestingly, this same individual also pointed out that monastic members of the Theravāda tradition had made changes to the system, as it was impossible for them completely to obey the rules established in ancient Indian contexts.⁴¹ In this informant's view, precepts need to be adapted to changed circumstances in both time and space because they have to relate to the reality of daily life. On the other hand, the Nanlin nun told me that she and her colleagues tried their best to maintain the traditional ascetic life, but that in one particular aspect the world had unavoidably changed: transport. In modern times, for longer journeys they have replaced walking with riding in a car, even though Buddhist monastic members are strictly forbidden to ride in vehicles.⁴² "It is impossible to swim to Thailand," as the nun put it! I was told, however, that such situations were reviewed carefully and seriously, and exceptions were not made lightly.

With regard to the reinterpretation of precepts in modern times, one senior Luminary nun presented a rather interesting example that connected past to present. Explaining that the modern era is different from the time and space when the *Vinaya* was compiled, she cited as an example that monastic members

⁴¹ Walpola Rahula, for instance, indicated that Theravāda monks found some rules impractical, because times and circumstances have changed (1978: 62–63). This resonates with what the DDM informant said.

⁴² T22n.1428, p0771b07–p0771c09. The 159th rule states: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* who is not sick goes in a vehicle, she [commits], except in particular circumstances, a *pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002: 921).

are not allowed to attend entertainments, to forestall criticism by the laity;⁴³ but there was no internet or (social) media in the past, so that people went to cinemas to watch movies or theatres to watch plays. Thus monastic members could (easily) be observed by people if they went to a cinema for entertainment. She (re)interpreted this rule in modern contexts:

Nowadays you can use the monastery's internet to download a film and watch it, or you can watch a lot of entertainment channels when turning on the computer, and listen to popular songs on MTV and in movies. Who would know that you are watching entertainment if you close your office door? Do you transgress the precept? In the past the Buddha set up the rule to prevent people's criticism. In my opinion, in current times, you have offended the precept if you indulge yourself in computer [entertainment] as you have neglected the Buddhist practice. This is why I think the *Vinaya* in different time and space needs to be re-interpreted and reviewed[.]

This same nun took as another example the precept against drinking alcohol on the grounds that it causes mental confusion.⁴⁴ In her perspective, this can be interpreted broadly today: "Monastic members who take drugs or psychedelics offend this precept, as these things confuse people's minds [similarly to alcohol]. We cannot do it [drug taking], even though ancient *Vinaya* does not forbid us". This sheds considerable light on monastic practitioners' perspectives regarding how traditional precepts are reapplied and reinterpreted in the face of the realities of today's religious life. It can also be tentatively suggested that Mainland nuns' views are more conservative, as they tended to stress that the Buddhist precepts were never out of date, while Buddhists in Taiwan seemed to focus more on how to adapt or reinterpret traditional precepts in accordance with the present era and society.

⁴³ T22n.1428, p0740b13–p0740b23. The 79th rule states: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* goes to see music, she [commits] a *pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002: 610).

⁴⁴ T22n.1428, p0735b24. The 36th rule states: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* drinks alcohol, she [commits] a *pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002: 537).

2.6 Effects of Institutional Type on the Manner of Practising Rules

During my fieldwork on the realities of *Vinaya* observance, many Mainland informants from non-*Vinaya*-centric nunneries stated that monastery contexts or environments affected the way they practised rules, with the precepts about money-handling⁴⁵ and fasting being mentioned frequently. A teacher nun from Dingguang Si repeatedly stressed that each monastery had a different situation and different priorities. At the Buddhist College, she said, the emphasis was on education and Buddhist doctrine; *Vinaya*-centric monasteries adhered to the *Vinaya* practice, but each one observed the precepts differently. However, altering how they (multiple members of multiple institutions) observed the rules did not seem to change their view of enlightenment. In other words, different environments and leaders of monasteries had a considerable influence on how the rules were practised. This Dingguang nun also provided one vivid example: only *śrāmaṇerīs* and *śikṣamāṇās* serve food to *bhikṣuṇīs* in Pushou Si (which is *Vinaya*-centric); but in Dingguang Si, the Buddhist College, all student nuns serve food by turns, regardless of their status.

My informant from DDM explicitly indicated that the monastery was based on Chan Buddhism, and that it promoted this tradition by holding religious activities for laypeople outside. In this informant's view, this outreach activity made it impossible to practise each precept strictly, but it was still vital to follow the important root precepts. A nun from Nanlin, on the other hand, referred to the Nanlin nunnery as a place that enabled nuns to observe rules strictly. In her view, Buddhists practising precepts to the letter handled everything smoothly because many protective deities helped them to overcome any difficulties. These comments reflect that Nanlin Nunnery and DDM represent different types of institutions focused on different Buddhist objectives: the former pays close attention to the *Vinaya*, and the latter emphasises Humanistic Buddhism for people and society. One nun from the Luminary Nunnery stressed that each monastery or organisation had its own viewpoint on the observance of the *Vinaya* rules. There was no absolute right or wrong against which to judge the various ways of interpreting and practising rules, but, a pluralistic way of observing *Vinaya*. The different attitudes and values that one can observe in regard to observing the precepts relate to differing conditions and contexts, educational backgrounds, religious practices, ways of propagating Buddhism

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion on the precept against touching money in contemporary Chinese Buddhism, see Chiu (2014: 09–56).

both individually and institutionally, and levels of interaction with the laity, as well as the adaptability and flexibility of Buddhism more generally.

From the above it is clear that different monastery types and contexts exert considerable influence on how the rules are practised in real-world situations. My current fieldwork results resonate significantly with Stuart Chandler's argument that a particular organisation within a given tradition will base its assertion "that it adheres to the pratimoksha on a strict observance of ... certain key precepts that are compatible with its own style of cultivation" (2004: 165).

To sum up, there was a significant consensus among my informant nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China regarding the general conception of Buddhist precepts as follows: nearly all interviewees told me that laity should not read or research *Vinaya*. They stressed the importance of understanding the spirit and background of each precept so that it could be observed flexibly. In the next section, I explore Chinese nuns' attitudes in relation to the number of the *bhikṣuṇī* rules, often considered to be a controversial topic in that the number of rules for nuns is higher than that for monks.

3. Nuns Having More Precepts than Monks Have

Generally, and across various traditions, Buddhist nuns have to observe more rules than monks do. For example, Chinese Buddhist nuns following the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* observe 348 rules,⁴⁶ monks, 250 rules. Nuns who are fully ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Theravāda tradition follow 311 rules while monks in the same tradition have 227 rules; and in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition there are 371 rules for female monastics and 257 rules for males. Nancy Barnes comments that "it is already evident ... that more restrictions are placed on women than men in the Buddhist monastic order ... nuns' lives are definitely more closely regulated than those of monks" (1994: 142). One could

⁴⁶ Besides, all female Buddhist monastic members, present and future, were required to follow the *gurudharma* rules, which are thus most frequently mentioned in explorations of the position of women in Buddhism. For the discussion on how these eight fundamental rules have potential to cause gender discrimination against nuns, see Horner (1930: 118-161); Gross (1993: 36-38); Owen (1998: 20-26); Dewaraja (1999: 72-74).

Any discussion of the *gurudharmas* should commence with the hotly debated actions of the Taiwanese nun Shih Chao-hwei 釋昭慧, who has criticised the overall tendency to observe these rules, claiming that some monks, together with 'slavish *bhikṣuṇīs*', continuously adopt the custom of discriminating against nuns. For detailed discussion on Chao-hwei and *gurudharmas* applied in Taiwan and Mainland China, see Heirman and Chiu (2012: 273-300); Chiu and Heirman (2014: 241-272).

easily extend this into an argument that the relative over-regulation of nuns is either a reflection or a cause of their lesser status. Masaaki Chikusa, for instance, relates it to the notion that women are “inferior to men” (2002: 19), quoting the monk Zhu Fatai:⁴⁷ “The Hearts of women are weak and frequently given to debauchery. The Buddha, realizing that detailed measures to guard against this were needed, in all instances provided twice as many precepts for women as for men” (T55.n2145, p80a4–a5; Chikusa 2002: 19). It is thus interesting to explore the views on this matter held by present-day nuns as they practise these rules in their daily lives.

Two main themes are shared across several nunneries in Mainland China: Tianning Si, Dingguang Si, Chongfu Si and Zizhulin. These are 1) protection for females due to their physical weakness and 2) negative female characteristics including mental weakness. First, my informant nuns from these four institutions expressed a belief that the Buddha formulated more precepts for *bhikṣuṇīs* because he wanted to protect nuns, who are seen as physically weaker than monks and generally more vulnerable to sexual abuse. While it might seem that nuns were limited by more rules and stricter regulations, this was given a positive interpretation by my informant nuns, as a modern extension of the Buddha’s wish to protect nuns. They considered the Buddha as their father who gave special care to nuns as his children; and as in many modern families, daughters are obliged to follow more rules than sons – e.g., coming home earlier and dressing appropriately – on the grounds that girls are more vulnerable in public.

Secondly, my informant nuns emphasised that they must follow more precepts because of females’ negative characteristics or mental weaknesses. A Chongfu Si nun explicitly referred to *Da’aidao biqiuni jing* 大愛道比丘尼經 (T.1478 *Sūtra on the Bhikṣuṇī Mahāprajāpatī*),⁴⁸ which mentions negative views on womanhood. The abbess of Luminary Nunnery, Ven. Wu Yin, claims that Buddhist nuns have more rules than monks – and are more likely to refuse to accept admonition – because of their innate characteristics. “Women are

⁴⁷ Zhu Fatai 竺法汰 (320–387), a disciple of Dao’an 道安, was a well-known Chinese Buddhist scholar.

⁴⁸ This is a later *Vinaya* text that takes a misogynistic attitude toward nuns. It is uncertain when and by whom the text was translated into Chinese, but it was extant in the first half of the fifth century CE. Moreover, although the text was classified as a translation in the earliest catalogues, it cannot be totally excluded that it is an original Chinese composition. For details, see Heirman (2001: 284–285).

mostly emotional; they tend to be influenced by personal feelings. Also, women are often driven by emotions; consequently, they do not differentiate principle from individual cases” (Wu Yin and Jen Han 1997: 22).

However, it is also worth noting that none of my Buddhist nun informants voiced any complaint that the mere arithmetical quantity of precepts constituted unfair treatment of nuns on the part of the Buddha. Some of my informants drew a broad comparison between Buddhist precepts and national, secular laws: while those who flout the law may feel they are being constrained, law-abiding people do not feel restricted by laws. A Dingguang Si nun said that it does not matter if nuns have more rules, as long as they follow the spirit of Buddhism. Thubten Chödrön, a Western Buddhist nun in Tibetan Buddhism, expressed a similar view: “[H]aving more precepts than a monk does not bother me. The more numerous and strict the precepts, the more my mindfulness improves. This increased mindfulness aids my practice and helps my progress on the path” (2000: 94–95). Still, we should not overlook the possibility that the above statements could be interpreted from the Buddhist apologist viewpoint: Buddhist followers understandably defending their faith against outsiders’ criticism.

When I asked Taiwanese nuns for their perspectives on the discrepancy in the number of precepts between monks and nuns, their responses clearly resonated with those of the Mainland Chinese nuns. For example, Master Sheng Yen taught nuns that *bhikṣuṇīs* received more precepts due to the Buddha’s protection of nuns in the Indian context of his own time. Similarly, a Foguangshan informant stated that woman’s physical attributes are related to the larger number of precepts. Many men are disrespectful of women, she explained; the issue of women’s and girls’ safety has always existed in society, and Buddhism reflects this social reality: gender inequality is a social problem, not a problem of the Buddhist *saṃgha* or *bhikṣuṇīs*’ precepts. One nun, from Nanlin, associated characteristic female weaknesses with specific *bhikṣuṇī* precepts, in an echo of Mainland informants’ statements. Interestingly, she also spoke of some monastic rules that were formulated specifically for monks. Indeed, when one compares the *bhikṣuṇī* and *bhikṣu* precepts in the category of *saṃghāvaśeṣa* offences, some rules are clearly shared by both nuns and monks,⁴⁹ while some *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rules apply only to monks. Take,

⁴⁹ In Young Chung has compared the *bhikṣuṇī* and *bhikṣu* precepts based on *Dharmaguptakavinaya*. Some *bhikṣuṇī* precepts also apply to *bhikṣus*; some are particularly for monks. For details, see Chung (1999: 29–105).

for instance, the first *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rule on not intentionally emitting semen. Clearly, the rule is specifically designed for monks, and could not be applied to *bhikṣuṇīs*. Likewise, some precepts were specifically set up for nuns to deal with menstruation.⁵⁰ Master Wu Yin, the abbess of Luminary nunnery, explicitly rejected the argument that nuns' larger number of precepts equates to greater restrictions, countering it with a question: "Some rules about women's menses garments are impossible to apply to *bhikṣus*. Do we have more restrictions of this kind?" In her book, Ven. Wu Yin does not agree that it is unjust for nuns to obey more rules than monks, since the formulation of *bhikṣuṇīs*' precepts stems partly from monks' inappropriate actions as well as nuns' flaws (2001: 32). In Wu Yin's view, the additional precepts enable Buddhist nuns to behave themselves better (ibid). Another Luminary nun, who was sitting next to the abbess (Wu Yin) during the interview, told me that she did not feel any constraints even if she had to observe a thousand rules, as she can interpret them from the Buddhist spirit. Her view clearly corresponded to the statements of the Mainland nun from Dingguang Si.

In conclusion, Buddhist nuns I interviewed in both Mainland China and Taiwan did not express any feeling of oppression or discrimination due to the larger numbers of *bhikṣuṇī* precepts. Rather, they suggested that men's and women's different physical structures and mental characteristics meant that some rules had to be gender-specific. The nuns' responses contradict some academic scholars' arguments that Buddhist nuns having more rules proves that they suffer discrimination (e.g. Chikusa, 2002: 19). It may of course be fruitless to attempt to triangulate between these two opposing positions. As Jens-Uwe Hartmann puts it: "to argue from an academic standpoint against a Buddhist view or vice versa may lead to a futile dispute between positions marked by either belief or rationality" (2010: 25). In the next part of this paper, I will focus on one of the particular precepts for nuns, specifically set up for reasons of safety.

4. Not Being Alone

According to the seventh *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rule of the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, Buddhist nuns should abstain from four practices that are considered dangerous: 1) crossing

⁵⁰ Taking one rule as a representative example: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* promises a menses cloth to another *bhikṣuṇī*, and if, afterwards, she does not give it, she [commits] a *niḥsargika pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002:473).

water alone; 2) entering a village alone; 3) sleeping alone; and 4) walking alone.⁵¹ This is because a nun may run the risk of being physically attacked or sexually abused when alone, because of her weaker physique. The same *DharmaguptakaVinaya* rule also states that the Buddhist community wants to ensure that a nun travelling alone does not commit any offence, especially of a sexual nature. Following the principle of establishing rules as and when problems occurred, the Buddha laid down rules in response to specific wrongdoing by his monastic followers. According to this tradition, the seventh *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rule has its origins in a particular incident.

Crossing water alone:⁵² A *bhikṣuṇī* hitched up her clothes to cross a river alone in the rainy season. Heavy rains caused floods, soaking her clothes as she crossed to the other bank. There the nun was sexually harassed by an ill-intentioned man. Some people witnessed the incident and criticised the nun's behaviour, in crossing water alone with her clothes hitched up, as being like that of a prostitute. This led them to question the *dharma*.

Entering a village alone:⁵³ A nun, Kṣemā, had many disciples in her Buddhist community. One day she entered a village without any of her pupils for company. People seeing her alone in the village suspected that she had come there to see a man.

Sleeping alone:⁵⁴ Kṣemā stayed one night in the village instead of returning to her community, and local villagers gossiped, saying she must be sleeping with a man.

Walking alone:⁵⁵ A nun, Sthūlanandā, and a group of six nuns walked behind another group of Buddhist nuns in the wilderness. The leading group asked the stragglers why they walked so slowly; the latter explained that they lagged behind because they wanted to get a man.

⁵¹ T22.n1428, p720b16–721a29. The seventh *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rule of the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*: “If a *bhikṣuṇī* crosses water alone, if she goes alone to a village, if she spends the night alone, or if she stays behind alone, she violates an immediate rule, a *saṃghāvaśeṣa*, that has to be given up” (translated in Heirman, 2002: 345).

⁵² T22.n1428, p720b16–b22.

⁵³ T22.n1428, p720b22–b26.

⁵⁴ T22.n1428, p720b26–b27.

⁵⁵ T22.n1428, p720b28–c07.

These four incidents led the Buddha to formulate the seventh *saṃghāvaśeṣa* rule forbidding nuns to be alone in these four situations. In the following parts we explore, based on an analysis of our fieldwork findings, contemporary Buddhist nuns' perceptions of the application of the precept in the Chinese context. However, the incident of crossing water alone will not be discussed in this study since in most modern contexts many bridges have been constructed over water. The incident of entering a village alone will be discussed together with that of walking alone, since these two activities could be considered to be very similar. I will first focus on Mainland China, and then on Taiwan.

4.1 Not Being Alone

According to my fieldwork observation, most of Mainland senior nuns I interviewed have their own room. In the 1980s, the government of the People's Republic of China began to revive Buddhism by reconstructing places of pilgrimage (albeit primarily for tourists) and monasteries. When conducting fieldwork in Mainland China in 2010, I found that most of the nunneries I visited had either recently been enlarged or were still undergoing reconstruction. Most senior teacher nuns in Tongjiao Si, Tianning Si, Dingguang Si and Zizhulin had individual rooms and slept alone.⁵⁶ As a female researcher, I was allowed to interview my informant nuns in their own rooms, so I was able to observe each nun's living environment. I found that some had comfortable rooms with cooking and ensuite facilities. When I asked nuns in various nunneries about their living conditions, I received similar replies. A Tianning Si nun told me that the abbess believed it enabled each nun to follow her own schedule without affecting other nuns. When two nuns shared a room, their religious schedules might come into conflict – one nun might be chanting while the other wished to meditate, etc – so, as there was enough space, each nun had her own room. A senior Dingguang Si nun said that the advantage of individual accommodation was that nuns did not impinge on each other when chanting *sūtra* or worshipping the Buddha. A Zizhulin teacher nun added that not all nuns were willing to occupy a single room. However, when two nuns shared a room, sometimes one stayed up late preparing tomorrow's lecture, while the other slept. These responses indicated that most current senior Buddhist nuns, except in *Vinaya*-centric nunneries, usually sleep alone in their own rooms to accommodate their personal schedules.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ A group of four to eight student nuns was arranged to share a room in Dingguang Si (fieldwork observation 2010).

⁵⁷ According to Yu-Chen Li's comparative study, Mainland monasteries have larger monastic

By contrast, Ven. Wu Yin, the abbess of Luminary Nunnery, strongly disapproves of nuns having their own rooms in the nunnery, and emphasises the importance of interaction with other practitioners for the progress of spiritual cultivation (2001: 172–173). Not interacting with other nuns in daily activities could hinder someone’s Buddhist practice, because it is human nature to treat oneself well.⁵⁸ A nun living alone in a well-furnished, comfortable room might “either isolate herself from the community or turn her room into a special place for her friends” (ibid: 173). Wu Yin takes the matter of nuns sleeping alone seriously, believing that it has an impact on personal religious practice that negatively influences the atmosphere of entire Buddhist organisations.

When exploring the issue of living quarters, it is best to observe them personally. However, monastics’ living quarters are generally off limits to guests. When I conducted fieldwork in Nanlin Nunnery, I luckily was allowed to live in an otherwise unoccupied wooden house that had been built for nuns, so I was able to obtain a basic picture of monastic rooms. When entering such a house through the main door, one first encounters a communal living space in which the nuns can study at two or three tables. Beyond this, each house has two or three rooms in which nuns sleep in small groups. In other words, Nanlin nuns’ living accommodation is arranged based on what *Vinaya* requires: that nuns should not sleep alone.⁵⁹

In DDM, my informant told me that three nuns slept together in a small room with three beds and individual wardrobes, and that such rooms were intended only for sleeping. Those who want to study, meditate or chant go to a separate study room within the nuns’ dormitory building.⁶⁰ This same nun further explained that Ven. Sheng Yen prefers this arrangement for his disciples: doing things in appropriate places avoids the problems encountered by some Mainland Chinese nuns who share sleeping accommodation. In Foguangshan, monks and

populations and are architecturally bigger than Taiwanese ones (2000: 302). The sheer size of Mainland Buddhist nunneries enables most senior nuns there to sleep alone in private rooms, and this environmental factor possibly affects Mainland nuns’ observance, not least in terms of the precept against sleeping alone

⁵⁸ Wu Yin’s viewpoint corresponds to that of a Dingguang nun who told me in November 2011: “It is good for two people to be together, as a person may become lax on her own.”

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that Nanlin nuns had moved out from the wooden houses to newly constructed building as living quarters when I revisited this nunnery in 2016 and 2017.

⁶⁰ Similarly, Foguangshan monastic students sleep in open rooms without desks, since they are supposed to study in the library or classroom, not in their dormitories (Chandler, 2004: 177).

nuns' living accommodation varies greatly depending on their monastic rank. For example, those who are promoted to the highest positions live in single rooms with their own bathrooms, while those of low rank need to share a room with five or six other people and use a public bathroom down the hall (Chandler, 2004: 177).

To sum up, my fieldwork results indicate that my informant nuns had a variety of viewpoints and practices regarding the acceptability of sleeping alone. Some believed that a single room enabled a nun to follow her own individual schedule without detriment to others, while others opposed it on the grounds that it affected their spiritual practice.

4.2 Not Going Alone - Mainland China

Most of my informant nuns in Mainland China expressed a belief that the Buddha formulated the rule against going out alone to protect Buddhist nuns, because they are physically more vulnerable than monks:

Pushou Si: We understand that the Buddha made this rule to protect nuns.

Tongjiao Si: There are more physical drawbacks to being a nun than to being a monk, because we are women, so we have more precepts. For example, a nun is not allowed to go out alone. The Buddha set up this rule to protect nuns, because two nuns walking together were less likely to be attacked.

Dingguang Si (A): The wise Buddha laid down this precept because he understood nuns' physical and mental weaknesses. It is good for two people to be together, as a person may become lax on her own. Try to keep this rule if you can find a companion to go out with you[.]

Dingguang Si (B): The Buddha's main concern expressed in this rule is to protect his disciples. Two nuns can look after each other while they are out. And sometimes, your companion can vouch for you if someone thinks you have been away from the monastery for too long.

Dingguang Si (C): The disadvantage of going out alone is that you are vulnerable if you meet a bad person. You cannot be looked after or get any help if you are ill.

Chongfu Si: Women, unlike men, are physically weak and vulnerable. The Buddha said a nun should be accompanied[.]

However, this consensus regarding the rule's origin did not result in a uniform way of observing it. My interviewees' attitudes toward the practice of the rule against going alone can be placed in two categories.

a. Strict Observance

Pushou Si: [W]e follow this rule strictly. Our teachers emphasise that we must always have a companion when we go out of the main gate of Pushou Si. Moreover, our companion must be a *bhikṣuṇī*, not a layperson. We must observe this rule carefully. Because we have a large number of people in this monastery, [it is easy for] each monastic member to help the others keep this rule. If a nun needs to go out, another nun will accompany her wherever she goes.

Chongfu Si: Here a nun is normally accompanied when going out for shopping or on business. She may attend special meetings alone, so the nunnery provides a driver. The advantage of being in a big monastery is that we have many nuns who can accompany someone if required. In a small monastery, it is harder to find a nun to go with you, so they may ask a laywoman for company.

b. Difficulties in Observance, or Non-Observance

Tongjiao Si: If I need to go somewhere outside the nunnery, I must find a companion, and usually someone is free; but it is not easy to find a companion if I have to go further afield for more than ten days.

Tianning Si: This rule can be a bit of a problem ... For example, I have a good relationship with [my senior classmate], so she can accompany me if I go out. However, sometimes you may need to go somewhere, but you cannot force someone to come with you, because she might want to do her religious practice ... The advantage of this rule is that it protects nuns from risky situations and two nuns can look after each other.

Dingguang Si (A): I sometimes break this precept. For example, I will need to find a nun to go to Mongolia with me if my parents die. If that happens, it will be hard to keep this rule: I have enough money for my own fare but would not be able to pay for my companion's. And another nun would lose teaching time in the Buddhist College if she accompanied me. I try my best to keep this precept, but it is not always possible.

Dingguang Si (B): [I]t can be hard to obey this rule in certain circumstances, and it may cause an inconvenience for the monastery. For example, how can a monastery provide accommodation for two people if they only have one bed?⁶¹ It can also be awkward because you must look after the other nun, who helps you keep this rule. Sometimes people don't want to help you even when they could, or they might not be used to accompanying someone else.

Dingguang Si (C): In our modern times and contexts, it is more convenient and economical to go alone, and it saves you the time it would take to find a person to accompany you.

As we have seen, many reported difficulties in observing the precept for various reasons, and across my fieldwork sites, only Pushou Si nuns claimed to follow the rule strictly. As a *Vinaya*-centric nunnery, its members – including the laity – are famous for rigorously interpreting and strictly observing Buddhist precepts. In this context, Pushou Si nuns reported that it was easy for them to find a *bhikṣuṇī* companion, because everyone in their nunnery understands the importance of observing the rule and is willing to help their colleagues adhere to it. In other words, Pushou Si's atmosphere of mutual support plays an important part in enabling the nuns to follow the rule. Nuns at Tongjiao Si, Tiannin Si, Dingguang Si and Zizhulin all stated that Pushou Si nuns have no problems or challenges in following this precept, simply because it is a *Vinaya*-centric institute; but my Pushou Si informant provided me with an additional important point indicating how seriously they take the precept there. A Pushou Si *bhikṣuṇī* who accompanies another *bhikṣuṇī* while outside the monastery should be in the

⁶¹ T22n.1428, p0744a25–p0744c05. The 90th precept of the *pācittika* states that if *bhikṣuṇīs* who are not sick sleep two together on the same bed, they commit a *pācittika* (see Heirman, 2002: 682).

same group or of the same rank.⁶² This was because only a *bhikṣuṇī* of the same level knows how to assist another *bhikṣuṇī*'s practice of rules and *karman*, such as the repentance *karman* (ritual act through which a nun can repent to another nun) between two nuns. When a *śikṣamāṇā* goes out, another *śikṣamāṇā* must accompany her, and so forth. But there is, she continued, an exception: two *śrāmaṇerīs* can accompany a *śikṣamāṇā* when she is out. It would seem that Pushou Si nuns follow this rule more strictly than those in other institutions; some nuns in other nunneries either find a lay companion or travel alone.

The scale of a nunnery would appear to be a crucial factor in nuns' observance of the rule. My informant nuns from Pushou Si and Chongfu Si both asserted that because their large monasteries have more people, they were better able to find companions and thus to abide by the rule.⁶³ This tends to explain why Buddhist nuns in Tongjiao Si and Tianning Si, which are home to only about 30 nuns each, say it is difficult to find a *bhikṣuṇī* companion if someone needs to travel far.⁶⁴ This echoes the Chongfu Si nun's remark that "[i]t is harder to find a nun to go with you in a small monastery, so they may ask a laywoman for company." Clearly, then, asking a layperson to accompany a nun is a solution that bridges the gap between strict observance of the rule and what is possible under real-world conditions.

My fieldwork data further indicate that nuns in Tongjiao Si, Tianning Si and Dingguang Si find it difficult to observe the rule. In these cases, finding a companion can be hard because everyone is busy with her own religious business and is unable or unwilling to help, or perhaps merely unaccustomed to doing so. Thus, we can argue that the type of Buddhist institution equally plays an important role in determining whether nuns can lawfully follow the rule or not. The informant nuns from these three institutions emphasised that observance of this rule may be modified by external circumstances, such as limited finances. Three nuns from Dingguang Si expressed concerns about travel expenses. It is generally considered discourteous for a *bhikṣuṇī* to ask a

⁶² When I revisited the Dingguang Si in 2017, one leading nun and a junior nun both emphasised that a *bhikṣuṇī* should be accompanied by another female practitioner with the *same rank* while going out of a monastery, if this *bhikṣuṇī* wants to lawfully observe the precept of not being alone (2017 fieldwork note).

⁶³ Around 1,000 Buddhist nuns live in Pushou Si, and about 300 in Chongfu Si.

⁶⁴ A Tianning nun told me that recently a nun needed to go out but could not find another nun to accompany her, because only 30 nuns live in this nunnery, so in the end a layperson went with her instead.

companion to pay her own fares and expenses when helping her to observe the rule of not going alone. So a nun going on a long journey must save up for her companion's and her own travel expenses, which often represent more money than the average Buddhist nun can afford. For instance, Ven. Longlian's social and religious status⁶⁵ distinguished her from the generality of nuns, but she shared this concern about travel expenses, and was reluctant to attend some Buddhist meetings as she grew older due to both physical and monetary considerations; in particular, she was reluctant to claim college expenses for her companion whenever she went out (Qiu, 1997:271).⁶⁶ Clearly, travelling expenses represent an obstacle for nuns who wish to observe the rule of not going out alone. A monastery or nunnery may subsidise a nun going out on Buddhist business with a companion, but it may be harder for a nun to obtain such financial support when travelling on private business, such as attending a parental funeral in a different province or region, as mentioned by the Mongolian nun in Dingguang. The informant nuns all indicated that they understood the Buddha's purpose in setting up the rule and wanted to follow it if they could. From the above, we can see that an unavoidable dilemma exists here between observing precepts and economic reality. Teaching schedules posed an additional concern for teacher nuns at Dingguang Si, which is a Buddhist nuns' college. Apart from student nuns, most of the nuns there are teachers of various scriptural courses. Absences by individual teachers are inconvenient enough, but the scheduling problems created by absence are compounded when a teacher nun asks permission to go somewhere and requests another teacher nun's company. Some nuns from non-*Vinaya*-centric nunneries reported that they felt shame when they could not observe the rule: in other words, it was not their intention to deliberately transgress the rule or to take the breaking of it casually or for granted.

So far, I have tried to capture contemporary Mainland Chinese nuns' perceptions of and practices related to the rule on going alone. In the next part, I analyze and compare fieldwork data of Taiwanese nuns.

4.3 Not Going Alone - Taiwan

My interviewees' attitudes toward the practice of the rule against going alone can be placed in two categories.

⁶⁵ For a detailed introduction of Longlian, see Bianchi (2001) and Qiu (1997).

⁶⁶ Longlian strictly followed the rule of not going out alone, asking someone to accompany her whenever she went out for Buddhist work. For details, see Qiu (1997: 142, 169, 190).

a. Strict Observance in Nanlin Nunnery (Fieldwork observation and notes):

- i. I observed Nanlin nuns' strict observance of the rule. One evening I was in a guest room where a senior nun, a female *kalpikāra*⁶⁷ and a male architect were discussing the construction of new buildings at the nunnery. The *kalpikāra*, needing to leave for something, asked me if I would stay with the senior nun, demonstrating how carefully they protect themselves against being alone with a male person.
- ii. During the development of the nunnery, the abbess was usually occupied with the business side of affairs. I found out that whenever the abbess went out, a senior nun had to accompany her.
- iii. My informant nun told me a personal story about how she strictly observed the rule by taking a companion with her on a journey back home from Taiwan to Malaysia.

These excerpts, interestingly, indicate that Buddhist institutions in Taiwan and Mainland China share some similarities regarding the practice of this rule. Firstly, nuns in Nanlin Nunnery (which is *Vinaya*-centric, like Pushou Si) adhere strictly to the precept of not going out or travelling alone, taking the rather cautious attitude that a nun should not be left unaccompanied in any situation. The cases of Nanlin and Pushou Si provide strong support for my argument that the type of Buddhist institution plays an important role in determining whether or not nuns can lawfully follow the rule.

Secondly, the remaining three Buddhist monasteries in Taiwan – DDM, Foguangshan, and Luminary Nunnery – all follow Humanistic Buddhism⁶⁸ and

⁶⁷ *Kalpikāra* (Pāli *kappiya-kāraka*): a lay attendant whose role is as an intermediary for monastic members' financial transactions and economic activities, which under *Vinaya* rules monks and nuns are strictly prohibited from conducting themselves, The role of the *kalpikāra* is not limited to the economic realm, however, and may include a number of other acts that monastic members are forbidden to perform.

⁶⁸ Master Taixu 太虛 played a crucial role in early twentieth century Chinese Buddhist reform, advocating “life Buddhism” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), whereby Buddhist monastic members should contribute to society by involving themselves in the world through Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, rather than concentrating primarily on other-worldly funeral rituals. For details, see Pittman (2001). Yin Shun 印順 (1906–2005) was a Chinese monk famous for having promoted Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) in Taiwan. Humanistic Buddhism encourages

observe this precept more flexibly:

b. Flexible Observance

DDM: Some nuns leave the monastery unaccompanied to teach or conduct monastic affairs. However, a nun must not see a doctor alone, because most doctors are male.

Luminary Nunnery: We will accompany a nun if she is ill and needs to see a doctor. However, a nun may go to the bank or shop for food alone. It is appropriate, however, to write a note to other nuns when leaving the monastery, but we must always accompany *śrāmaṇerīs* wherever they go.

Foguangshan: Why should I not go alone if I go to safe places? According to one of the Buddhist rules, a Buddhist nun may not be alone with a man.⁶⁹ When I studied at XX⁷⁰ University, I had to take a companion with me whenever I discussed my research with my male professor. This was impractical because I had to pay for her accommodation and airfares.

Due to the influence of Humanistic Buddhism as advocated by Ven. Taixu, Yin Shun, Hsing Yun and Sheng Yen, some Buddhist monks and nuns in Taiwan have become closely engaged with local communities, in stark contrast with those in Mainland China. Most Taiwanese nuns I met from the three above-named institutions spend much of their time spreading Buddhism and serving

monks and nuns to interact closely with the wider community. The three leading Buddhist organisational leaders or founders in Taiwan— Sheng Yen (Fagushan), Hsing Yun (Foguangshan) and Cheng Yen (Tzu Chi) – advocate Humanistic Buddhism through various objectives and activities, including monastic and secular education, welfare work and environmental protection. For an overview, see Long (2000: 53–84) and Pittman (2001). This study will not research the Tzu Chi Foundation since most of its members are laypeople. For a detailed introduction to the Tzu Chi Foundation, see Huang (2009) and Yao (2012).

⁶⁹ T22n.1428, p0740c11–12. For example, the 80th precept of the *pācittika* states that “If a *bhikṣuṇī* goes to a village and stands or talks together with a man in a secluded place, she [commits] a *pācittika*”. T22n.1428, p741a11-a12. The *bhikṣuṇī* 81st precept of *pācittika* states that “If a *bhikṣuṇī* enters a screened place together with a man, she [commits] a *pācittika*” (translated in Heirman 2002: 612, 614).

⁷⁰ Here I make the nun’s university anonymous. The nun was famous and had a high-ranking position in Foguangshan in the past.

the community. My fieldwork data indicate that some senior nuns from DDM and Luminary Nunnery sometimes went outside their institutions alone for the purposes of Buddhist social work and religious teaching. In modern Taiwanese society every nun is busy with her own monastic duties, so it is usually hard to find a companion; this is similar to some nuns' experiences in Mainland China. However, both DDM and Luminary nuns insisted that a *bhikṣuṇī* companion was required when a nun needed to see a doctor. It is worth noting that most places Buddhist nuns visited on monastic business were regarded as safe. This may explain why the nuns at my research sites in Taiwan exhibited a more flexible attitude toward the rule about not going out alone, but nevertheless adhered to it when they went to see a male doctor. Some medical examinations or treatments may involve physical contact or even invasive procedures, and women are seen as vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment, which tends to explain why a nun (or indeed any woman) may feel safer if a companion stays with her when she sees a male doctor. Luminary Nunnery *śrāmaṇerīs* always go out accompanied because they are usually quite young and inexperienced.

By way of reply to one of my questions to her, my Foguangshan informant explicitly asked me why she should not be alone in safe conditions. She also shared a financial concern with some nuns in Mainland China, deriving from her personal experience of studying abroad at XX University. Though Foguangshan has sufficient funding to support its members studying abroad,⁷¹ the monastery was not necessarily willing or able to provide extra

⁷¹ There four different kinds of education fees provided by FGS to its disciples, set forth in Table 1; it clearly indicates how well-funded this monastery is:

Type	Specific items	Subsidy criteria	Paying institute
Education fees for disciples	Disciples are permitted by the monastery to study abroad	Full payment	Monastery local branch(es)
	Disciples are permitted by the monastery to study abroad, by correspondence course or the National Open University	Full payment	Dharma Transmission Centre
	Disciples are permitted by the monastery to study at 'cramming' school as preparation for overseas study	Full payment	
	Tutoring for refresher courses/On the job training	Full payment	Affiliated unit

Table 1: The Criteria for FGS Disciples' Welfare and Payment. Sources from *Fo Guang Shan Guidebook for Disciples* (2006: 156).

living expenses for a second nun whose sole role was accompanying my informant to meetings with her supervisor. She said it was impractical in those circumstances. The FGS nun's statement clearly responds to the case of a Dingguang nun, who experienced difficulties paying her companion nun's traveling expenses (for her parental funeral), so that she could not observe the rule of not going out alone.

Besides, if we were to exclude the impact of finances on adherence to the rule, as discussed above, female students would be likely to find themselves alone with their male teacher frequently, in tutorials or office hours, as is common in most universities and other academic institutions. In this Foguangshan nun's view, such a situation did not usually require a companion – unlike a girl or woman undergoing a physical examination in a hospital. Most of my Taiwanese informant nuns from DDM, Foguangshan, and Luminary Nunnery flexibly interpreted and practised the rule of not going out or travelling alone, while those in *Vinaya*-centric nunneries adhered strictly to the precept by not going out unaccompanied under any circumstances.

Though questions about the external factors that may influence the observance of the rule against going out alone elicited a multiplicity of responses from my interviewees in various types of Buddhist institutions in Taiwan and Mainland China, these may not adequately represent the viewpoints of all Buddhist nunneries in both regions. Nevertheless, the interviewees' answers provided a broad overview of contemporary Buddhist nuns' perceptions of the applicability of the precept in the Chinese cultural context.

5. 'Impractical' Rules

The last part of this study discusses rules seen as 'impractical' in modern times. One is the above mentioned rule on the chamber pot, seldom seen in modern contexts. A second example is the rule on keeping food overnight. These two examples provide interesting information on how monastics, particularly nuns, in the framework of this paper, deal with these kind of rules.

5.1 The Use of a Chamber Pot

Before presenting the fieldwork data, it is helpful to examine the background of the rule. According to the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, a nun who shared a room with five others defecated and urinated in the chamber pot at night, then threw the waste over the nunnery wall – without looking – early the next morning.

The contents hit a minister who was passing by on his way to see the king. The nun's waste stained the minister's body and clothes, making him angry at what she had done. This incident was later settled with the help of a *brāhmaṇa*. On hearing of this incident, the Buddha established the rule that⁷² "If a *bhikṣuṇī*, at night, relieves herself in a pot, and if, in the daytime, she throws it over the wall without looking, she [commits] a *pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002: 608). My interviewees' attitudes toward the chamber pot rule can be placed in two categories.

a. Possibility of Use

Pushou Si: Take the rule of using a night pot, which you have mentioned as an example. This rule does not apply in Taiwan or *Wutaishan*. When I went forth and stayed in a small rural temple, however, I still used a chamber pot at night and threw the waste away the next day. This illustrates how something that seems unlikely to happen in our current daily life may occur elsewhere or at other times.

DDM: It is convenient to use the toilet at night because modern *saṃgha* quarters are well designed. Unless they were ill, it is unlikely that anyone would use a chamber pot. If someone uses it, they will empty it down the toilet. It is rare to see anyone throwing waste over the wall.

These comments raise some interesting points: first, that it is important not to arbitrarily assume something is definitely old-fashioned or no longer in use; as the Pushou Si nun mentioned, modern-day nuns may still need to follow the rule if they find themselves in a particular environment. In other words, a rule must not be assumed to have lapsed from disuse, simply because most people would tend to think it has. The DDM informant nun, meanwhile, reminded us that the severely ill continue to use chamber pots since they do not have enough strength to get out of bed to go to the toilet, even if most healthy people or non-caretakers would seldom think of this.

⁷² T22.n1428, p739c17–p740a26. For details, see Heirman (2002: 607–609). For a full discussion on the historical setting of this rule, see Schopen (2008).

b. Daily Proper Etiquette

Tongjiao Si: Now that we have toilets and don't need to use chamber pots, the main purpose of this rule concerns proper etiquette. We must be very careful whatever we do, not to annoy people or attract criticism. Religious practice is about learning better behaviour.

Zizhulin: This rule is redundant. As I said, you do not transgress the rule if you do not need to practise it. You can extend the meaning of this rule to include throwing something away without affecting people adversely.

Nanlin Nunnery: You need to be careful not to splash the contents of a chamber pot for hygiene reasons. Nowadays, we do not use a chamber pot, but we are careful not to splash anyone when pouring anything down the drain.

Luminary Nunnery: We not only read the chamber-pot rule, but we also need to know the origins of why the rule was established. Meanwhile, it is still possible nowadays to accidentally stain someone's clothes, or we might spill water when washing the floors, and splash the people below.⁷³

My informant nuns from both Mainland China and Taiwan clearly shared a viewpoint that extended the meaning of the night-pot rule to modern contexts, even though they no longer used such items. Some interpreted it as meaning that they should be careful when cleaning or disposing of waste liquids, to avoid causing trouble or inconvenience. Some extended the rule even further: into a general admonition to avoid attracting criticism through inattentiveness or inconsiderateness when performing tasks of any kind. Collectively, my informant nuns' interpretations of and attitude toward the night-pot rule represent an important demonstration of how contemporary Buddhist monastic members extend the meaning of certain rules, even or especially if they seem to be inapplicable in modern times.

⁷³ This is not directly coming from interview data but from Master Wu Yin's teaching on *bhikṣuṇī* precepts in the Ordination Hall of the Sun-Moon Temple in Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 2002 (Wu Yin Shih 2003 CD 6).

Further, it should be noting that the mere 348 rules found in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* can hardly be expected to cover all aspects of contemporary nuns' daily lives. Communications, transport, and sanitation have changed beyond recognition, to be sure, but so have many other aspects of society. During the interviews many informant nuns emphasised the importance of understanding the background and spirit of monastic rules and practising them appropriately in modern daily life, even though some of them are no longer applicable.

5.2 No Keeping of Food Overnight

In this section I discuss the rule of not keeping food overnight as applied in contemporary institutions. Prior to the twentieth-century development of refrigeration, food kept overnight could easily go bad. Today, however, storing food in a refrigerator is quite common in most modern societies.

The origins of this precept lie in a *bhikṣu*'s story. An honourable monk, Kāḷa, found it fairly easy to obtain food in the city of Rājagṛha, so he stored some food to eat later, which spared him from joining the other monastic members asking for daily alms. But when the other monks did not see Kāḷa, they wondered if he was dead, or perhaps hurt by thieves or wild animals. Some days later one of the other monks saw Kāḷa and asked him where he had been, so he told them how he had kept enough food for several days in order to focus on his religious practice. The Buddha heard about Kāḷa's behaviour and admonished him that keeping food was inappropriate and set a bad example for other members. The Buddha thus established the precept that Buddhist monastic members are not allowed to keep food for themselves: "If a [*bhikṣu*] keeps food [until the next day] and [later] eats it, [he] [commits] a *pācittika*" (translated in Heirman, 2002: 534).⁷⁴ We turn now to an examination of how Chinese nuns practice this rule in modern times, which can be categorised into two perspectives:

i. Yes

Pushou Si: In Pushou Si monastery we follow this rule strictly. We give our leftovers to *kalpikāra* or laypeople. We never eat yesterday's food[.]

⁷⁴ Because the *bhikṣuṇī* order came into existence after the *bhikṣu* order, some *bhikṣuṇī* rules have been adapted from those governing *bhikṣus*. For nuns, the rule against keeping food overnight is found in the 25th *pācittika* rule from the *bhikṣuṇī prātimokṣa* in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (T22.n1428, p0662c25–663b9).

Nanlin Nunnery: The monastic members' food consists entirely of lay offerings. From sunrise to noon, Buddhists accept and eat donated food. After midday, all unfinished food is regarded as leftovers, and monastic members would transgress the rule if they were to keep leftovers overnight rather than giving them to laypeople to eat.

ii. No

DDM: In this monastery we do not follow the rule strictly. It was established to encourage monks to ask for alms every day, which is rather different from our current living environment ... To show our gratitude for food each day's leftovers are served the following day to monastic members. Monks and nuns must eat each meal unless they are ill and have no appetite for food.

Luminary Nunnery: There is a difference between modern and historical times: now that we have fridges to keep food longer, we can keep unfinished food and eat it the next day. Although we cannot observe this precept, it is good to know that eating leftover food will not make us ill. Everyone knows the precept about not eating food from the previous day, but no one feels she is transgressing by doing so.

These excerpts show very significant divergences between my informant nuns' various practices surrounding the overnight storage of food. Food is particularly cherished in DDM, where the daily leftovers are served to monastic members the following day. According to one of his disciples, this practice of gratitude for food in DDM may stem from the founder, Master Sheng Yen, who was personally thrifty and ate nearly rotten fruit (*litchi*).⁷⁵ This might partly explain that the precept of not keeping food overnight is not rigidly implemented in DDM. By contrast, Pushou Si and Nanlin are *Vinaya*-centric monasteries, so it is unsurprising that the nuns there emphasise that they do not keep or eat leftovers, instead re-distributing them to *kalpikāras* or laypeople. Additionally, I noticed that my Nanlin informant nun always asked me the exact date I would

⁷⁵ Online news about Master Sheng Yen. Retrieved 26 October 2017 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txJ8sPeGT8c>

be visiting Nanlin, so that appropriate quantities of food could be prepared, to avoid having any leftovers. Her above-quoted statement on this matter contrasts strikingly with those of Luminary nuns. In short, different Buddhist institutions have opposing practices of this rule, depending on their focus (food gratitude versus precept observance).

Besides, keeping food overnight in the fridge was considered acceptable by the Luminary nun, who believed that modern technology means eating leftovers from the fridge does not pose a health risk, in stark contrast to the Mainland China nuns' views. Nuns from Tongjiao Si, Zizhulin and Pushou Si were concerned that keeping food in the fridge might give rise to harmful bacteria.

Pushou Si: The Buddha laid down this rule for health reasons; to improve his followers' physical condition by not eating food which had been kept overnight[.]

Tongjiao Si: [F]ood kept overnight could go off in hot weather in India. Eating food kept overnight is hygienic, though, now that we have a fridge.

Zizhulin: Whether we have a fridge to keep food fresh is not the point – and food kept in the fridge usually contains unhealthy bacteria.

Interestingly, it can be seen that my informant nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China had opposing views on storing food in the fridge in terms of hygiene and health. In addition, some of my Mainland informant nuns considered that this rule is strongly related to religious practice for the prevention of attachment. Nuns from Pushou Si, Tongjiao Si and Zizhulin emphasised that not keeping food overnight prevents monastic members from becoming attached to food. Since most Buddhist monastics are ordinary people on a religious path who have not yet attained enlightenment, their greed may tempt them if food is kept overnight in their living quarters:

Pushou Si: This rule has several layers of meaning: not eating leftover food makes us less greedy. For example, if I eat delicious food today, I may crave more of it tomorrow, giving rise to greedy thoughts. In religious practice, it is crucial for monastic practitioners to avoid attachment and obsessive thoughts ... When we go to the dining hall, we eat food to maintain our body but

without any thoughts of food. I eat whatever food is provided in the dining hall. The Buddha's intention in establishing rules for his disciples was to help them to avoid committing offences related to desire, hatred and ignorance[.]

Tongjiao Si: The Buddha set up this rule to prevent monastic members being distracted by thoughts of food[.]

Zizhulin: The Buddha laid down this rule to prevent monastic members being distracted by food. We are ordinary people and may still think about eating food if there is some in the room. The greedy mind is an obstacle to religious practice, so the Buddha's rule protects us from conditions leading to desire[.]

These excerpts clearly show my Mainland informants from various nunneries considered that the rule is crucial to their religious practice for the sake of eradicating greed.

Discussion of the precept of not keeping food overnight elicits a range of opinions and practices about rule-observance, and is just one typical example of the variety of opinion that exists in current Chinese Buddhist institutions. On the one hand, the two broad types of monastic institutions (i.e. *Vinaya*-centric and non-*Vinaya*-centric) play key roles in influencing how precepts are followed. On the other hand, the different interpretations and practices my interviewees described also reflect a condition common to both contemporary and historical Chinese Buddhist circles: there is no absolute or prescribed way of observing *Vinaya*. Indeed, as Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Foguangshan, aptly comments:

When I was young, I noticed that the most serious problem for Buddhism is [that it may become] a community without systems, which leads to *disunity* when each Buddhist monastic does things in his or her own way. Problems arise when there are no regulations about robes, going forth, tonsure, ordination and education. (Hsing Yun Shih, 2009: 29)

The rule against keeping food overnight is one example of how things can be considered in different perspectives regarding the absence of standardisation in many aspects of Chinese Buddhism. I have personally observed that this disunity in rule-observance sometimes causes members of various monasteries

to privately discuss their disapproval of the way others follow *Vinaya*. This is hinted at by Hsing Yun as a potentially serious problem of unity and harmony for the development of Chinese Buddhism, the full scope of which remains an open question worthy of further exploration in Buddhist studies.

6. Conclusion

My fieldwork observations and interview data confirm that differences indeed exist between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese monastic communities with regard to Buddhist precepts. Nevertheless, there was a significant consensus among my informant nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China regarding the general conception of the precepts. For example, nearly all respondents, except those in Luminary nunnery told me that the laity should not read or research *Vinaya*. The majority of nuns who participated in the study stressed the importance of understanding the spirit and background of each precept so that it could be observed flexibly. It was likewise generally agreed that nuns were required to follow more rules than monks because of females' physical weakness and other sex-specific characteristics, and the Buddha's concomitant wish to protect them; and no nun in the study regarded the greater number of rules as discriminatory or otherwise unfair. And it was widely believed that, in addition to the precepts established by the Buddha, monastic members should respect and follow local customs and practices so as to avoid local laypeople's criticism.

Some minor precepts could not be observed to the letter, partly due to the type of institution or its immediate cultural/geographical context. Nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China shared broadly similar views on such issues, but a comparison of the rhetoric of their responses reveals a subtle point: Mainland nuns tend to interpret these minor rules more traditionally and conservatively, while Taiwanese ones took a more open and flexible stance, a nuance in the interview data that should not be overlooked.

As for the actual practice of certain precepts (e.g. not going out or sleeping alone, or not keeping food overnight), we have seen that the various opinions and approaches crucially depend on each institution's internal policy as much as individuals' personal convictions and choices. Certainly, the present research on precept observance has confirmed that every informant nun and each institution maintains a somewhat different approach to *Vinaya*, and each such unique approach has the potential to cause ill-feeling within the Buddhist community, as would happen within any human institution. This also leads us to rethink the

degree to which Buddhist monastics can be flexible in observing the rules before they are questioned or challenged by members of different traditions. Indeed, a dispute over whether to observe the precepts flexibly or not still exists between modernists (Humanistic practitioners) and traditionalists (non-Humanistic ones). As Chandler has noted,

Along with downplaying asceticism, Humanistic Buddhists believe that treading the middle path implies a certain openness to altering aspects of Buddhist practice, especially those concerning monastic life that, having been rendered outmoded by current circumstances, have become obstacles to benefiting others. Any literalist interpretation of the Vinaya or of tradition, in fact, is said to contradict the founding teacher's exhortation that each person is to think for himself or herself so as to respond appropriately to every new situation. This understanding of how to emulate the Buddha has the advantage of allowing for flexibility. The hermeneutical challenge is to determine the degree to which such flexibility is permissible (2006: 186).

Monastic members who do not follow Humanistic Buddhism accuse those affiliated with Foguangshan, DDM, and Tzu-Chi⁷⁶ (all Humanistic Buddhist institutes) of being lax in the practice of monastic discipline, and thereby of weakening the whole edifice of Buddhist monastic ethics; they also specifically reject the Humanists' claim that the latter's "adaptation of precepts and custom in light of current conditions" is acceptable (Chandler, 2006: 186–187). The Humanistic groups refute the charge, saying that "it is easy to claim complete purity for oneself when one remains behind shut doors and therefore has almost no interaction with others" (ibid). This Humanist counter-claim echoes Welch's compelling remark: "In general, observance of the rules was in inverse proportion to contact with the populace" (1967: 128), a view which partly resonates with my fieldwork results. Inevitably, a gap exists between ideal religious practice and daily life in a monastic community, unless a monastic member chooses to live a completely detached life in the

⁷⁶ The Tzu Chi Foundation (or Ciji Gongde hui) 慈濟功德會, founded by Ven. Cheng Yen in Taiwan, has been recognised as the largest non-governmental and international humanitarian organisation for worldwide social welfare and charity. For details see C. Julia Huang (2009) and Yao (2012).

forest or some other isolated place where s/he has little or no contact with people or society.⁷⁷ In short, no consensus on the degree of flexibility that should be discerned in *Vinaya* rules has yet been reached even within Taiwan's Buddhist communities, let alone in Chinese Buddhist contexts across both Taiwan and Mainland China.

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Abbreviations

- T. *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, J. Takakusu, K. Watanabe (eds.), Tōkyō. (CBETA) edition

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⁷⁷ Yu-Chen Li states that Nanlin Nunnery's location in a remote mountain area of Taiwan enables its members to maintain Buddhist asceticism without being interrupted by "demanding urban life" (2000: 145).

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