

The Most Outstanding Bhiksuni Contribution to Education in Contemporary China

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Introduction:

Master Nun Longlian (隆莲法师) (1909-2006) is the first outstanding *bhiksuni* in contemporary China. She was vice president of the Buddhist Association of China, and abbess of two nunneries in the southwestern province of Sichuan (四川): Aido tang (爱道堂) and Tiesiang ci (铁象寺).¹

Master Longlian's high academic achievements were known far and near. She served as researcher of the Buddhist Art Institute of China, and she also served in many other academic positions. She is the author of numerous books and essays. Aside from her profound knowledge of Buddhism, she speaks English and Tibetan, which is rare knowledge in China. She was one of the compilers of *A Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*. Master Longlian was not only an exalted Buddhist scholar, but also worked hard to re-establish dual ordination in China, which was absent from the Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries.

Her devotion to Dharma teaching is great. She declares, "I am destined to live with blackboards and chalk, as a teacher, my entire life." When the status of Buddhist nuns was low in China, she realized that in order to improve the status within society, education was essential for nuns. She helped establish the Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' College (SBNC) in 1983, which was the first contemporary college for Buddhist Nuns to be accepted by the Chinese government. It was first housed in a temple named Tiexiangsi (Iron Statue Temple) in the southern outskirts of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. Master Longlian served as president.

The Chinese *bhiksunis* education has developed greatly over the past 30 years. Many *bhiksunis* have graduated from this college, and are now working in different corners at home and abroad, receiving great acclaim from the society. But, still some problems remain in the present situation. What should they do? What can they offer to society? In the 21st century, how to solve the problems and discover the direction of the development of *bhiksunis*' education is a long and difficult task.

A brief account of Master nun Longlian's early life

Ven. Nun Longlian was born in Leshan town, Sichuan province. Her secular name was You Yongkang.² Her father and her grandfathers were famous scholars. Since her father could not afford to provide full education for all seven of his children, he provided home education which he preferred anyway. After leaving school at the age of twelve, Yongkang studied secular subjects at home, including math, physics, and painting. Being brought up in an intellectual Chinese family, Yongkang acquired deep foundation of

¹ Si or Tang is the Chinese word for the temple, si or tang instead of the English equivalent will be used throughout this paper.

² This order follows the traditional Chinese style for names, which places family name first followed by given name. All Chinese names throughout this paper will follow this format.

classical literature, poetry and calligraphy. In addition, she learned English from an American teacher, and Tibetan language (藏文) from Ven. Fazun. Later, she learned traditional Chinese medicine. At the age of twenty, she started teaching at Chendu Women's Normal School. In the meantime, Ven. Longlian published her first book: *The first book on my dedication to learning*³ (《志学初集》). She was known in her province, deservedly, as a talented woman and earned the title “Number One Female Scholar” (女状元).⁴

In 1939, the government of Sichuan set three examinations for those aspiring to be educational administrators, civil servants, or senior civil servants. Yongkang not only passed all exams for each of the three designations but she also came first in all three. She became the first woman active in the provincial government. She was appointed as an editor-translator at the provincial editing and translating bureau but surprised everyone four years later by relinquishing her prestigious position to become a Buddhist nun at Aidaotang. Yongkang became a nun because she was disillusioned with her career and disappointed in love. Yongkang later maintained that her decision came about because of her faith in Buddhism and because of the Buddhist influence in her family.

Her family had indeed been deeply involved with Buddhism: Yongkang's maternal grandfather was president of the local Buddhist association. Her maternal grandmother and mother were devout Buddhists, and her father also knew a great deal about Buddhism. When she was a child, she began to show an interest in Buddhism. In 1921, Yongkang took refuge in the Three Gems (Buddha 佛, Dharma 法 and Sangha 僧). Five years later, she found employment as a teacher in Chendu. While in Chendu, she took advantage of every opportunity to hear Buddhist lectures and teachings on the scriptures. In this way, she was able to study with many famous Buddhist masters, including Fazun, Nenghai, and Wang Enyang. Her first work on Buddhism was called *A brief discussion on Mahāyānasamgraha* (《摄大乘论疏略述》).⁵

In 1941, she became a nun at Love Dharma Nunnery, and in that same year, she received full ordination (具足戒). In 1942, she served as dean of Sichuan Lotus School Nunnery which belongs to the Pure Land tradition, and at that time she took refuge and learned from Master Guru Nenghai. By the end of the 1940s, she was the abbess of two nunneries in Chengdu(成都): Aidaotang (爱道堂) and Tiesiangsi (铁象寺), and maintained these positions throughout her life.

Master Longlian has said that in her remaining years she wishes to make a Buddhist college for nuns to foster women Buddhist leaders in China. In 1983, Master Longlian finally established a Buddhist college for nuns at the Tiesiangsi. This was the first institution of higher education devoted to the training of female Buddhist scholars. She was president of the college and taught courses such as Buddhist knowledge and law, and sutras in classical Chinese. She declared, “I am destined to live with blackboards and chalk, as a teacher, my entire life.”⁶ At 88, the abbess was still active, shuttling between

³ Her first book was a collected of her original poems.

⁴ In Chinese this is a very prestigious title, Chinese - English dictionary defines 状元 as “Number One Scholar; the title conferred on the person with the best score in the highest imperial examination.” Yongkang is female, so she earned the title “Number One Female Scholar” (女状元).

⁵ This was her commentary about Mahāyānasamgraha, this was the fundamental and based book of yogacara.

⁶ Qiu Shanshan, Biography of Venerable Longlian, Fuzhou, Fujian Meishu Chubanshe, 1997, p67

the two nunneries. Ordinarily, she lived in Tiesiangsi and went to Adiaotang on weekends to teach the scriptures to the resident nuns, as well as to lay Buddhist followers. Her daily schedule was full. Sometimes she taught for half a day without a break. Master Longlian devoted herself to the education of Buddhist nuns for many years. Her devotion to Buddhist Dharma was great, and will be remembered forever.

Master Longlian is the author of numerous books and essays. Some elucidated Master Nenghai's teachings; some are based on notes of teaching she received from other masters; some are translations from Tibetan, while others are related to the *Vinaya* and other Buddhist scriptures. An accomplished poet, painter, and educator, Master Longlian was awarded the Teaching Culture Award and a special copy of the *Taisho Buddhist Canon* by the Japanese Buddhist Association in 1982. As a Buddhist scholar, Master Longlian was the only woman invited by the chief editor and the ministry of culture of Sri Lanka to contribute to the section on Chinese Buddhism in a Buddhist encyclopedia that they were compiling. She was also proficient in the Tibetan language, and one of the compilers of the *Great Chinese–Tibetan Dictionary* (汉藏字典) published in the 1950s. She is generally regarded as the most exemplary nun in contemporary China.

At the age of 97, 6:45am, 9 November 2006, Master Longlian passed away at Love Dharma Nunnery, Chengdu Province, China. She was vice president of the Buddhist Association of China (中国佛教协会副会长), and president of SNBC.

Master Longlian re-establishes dual ordination

Master Longlian was not only an exalted Buddhist scholar, but also worked hard to establish ordination for Tibetan nuns. There are four-fold assembly of disciples in Buddhism: *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇīs*, *upāsaka* and *upāsika*. In Tibetan Buddhism the assembly of *bhikṣuṇīs* is non-existent. Buddhist women was just allowed to become novice (*Samaneni*) who from home to homelessness. There were also only *samaneni* in Tiexiangsi.

In the autumn of 1948, the first full ordination ceremony, in which Tibetan nuns received *bhikṣuṇīs* precepts, was held at Tiexiangsi in Sichuan and supervised by *bhikṣuṇī* Longlian.⁷ So the Tiexiangsi is the only Nunnery of full ordination for Tibetan *bhikṣuṇīs*.

Master Longlian also worked hard to re-establish dual ordination in China which was absent from the Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries.

In 1949, on the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Master Longlian and Master Nenghai invited the *Vinaya* Master Guanyi to teach monastic discipline to nuns. At the end of the teachings, Guanyi conferred the *Sikṣamāna* (probationary) precepts on the whole community. According to the *Vinaya* texts, the term of these vows is two years, after which the nuns were supposed to receive full ordination in the *Dharmagupta* tradition,⁸ the *Vinaya* School followed by Chinese Buddhists. The correct way for nuns to receive full ordination follows the dual ordination procedure, which was first introduced into China from Sri Lanka in 434 C.E. According to these

⁷ Nimalamu, Tibetan Nunnery in Chengdu: Tiexiangsi research, Journal of Kangding Nationality Teachers College, Vol.12 No.2 (June, 2003),p10.

⁸ Dharmagupta code of 348 rules for nuns is used in China. It is chanted on the observance days at the full and new moons.

rules, nuns should receive the nun precepts first from the nun community and then from the monk community. The Chinese term for this ordination ritual is called *erbu sengjie* (二部僧戒). Ordination is needed by the two sanghas. Unfortunately, the nuns did not follow this dual ritual when they received their own ordination, but later Master Longlian decided to resurrect this procedure in China.

At the Fourth National People's Congress of the Buddhism Association of China in December 1980, Master Longlian expressed her wish to re-establish dual ordination. In 1982, she finally fulfilled her goal. Master Longlian held the first ceremonies since the 1950s for the full ordination of nuns. Only eight nuns received full ordination at this time. The ordination procedures of Tiexiangsi follow the Chinese tradition. Another full ordination ceremony was held in the winter of 1986. On 13 June 1993, when Master Longlian was invited to participate in the memorial service for the 1925th anniversary of the establishment of the White Horse Monastery in Luoyang (洛阳白马寺), the first Buddhist temple ever established in China, she presided over the biggest ceremony for the full ordination of Chinese Buddhist nuns. More than 400 nuns attended the ceremony. Between 1982 and 1997 more than five major ceremonies were held.

Master Longlian and her educational career

Master Longlian was a brilliant nun and scholar. After the Cultural Revolution, Master Longlian restored the nunnery Aidao Temple where she used to teach both nuns and lay Buddhist women. As more women joined the community, seeing the lack of young successors in Chinese Buddhism, she realized that in order to improve the status of Buddhist nuns in society, education was essential. At the Fourth National People's Congress of the Buddhism Association of China in December 1980, Master Longlian solemnly offered a proposal to found a nuns institute, in view that there were no regular Buddhist school to train nuns in China at that time. Her proposal met with Mr. Zhao Puchu, the president of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), as well as other eminent monks.

In 1982, President Zhao Puchu, accompanied by Master Ming Yang (who was the vice president of BAC), went to Sichuan on an inspection tour. During their visit, President Zhao Puchu decided to set up Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' Institute. In 1983, Master Longlian's proposal was finally approved by the authorities. The Third Plenum of the 11th after the implementation of religious policies, according to the "Office of the State Council transmitted the State Council's Religious Affairs Bureau on the nun religious institutions in the notice to seek instructions" (Guoban Fa 1982, 60), and the "Sichuan Provincial People's Government Agreed to operate on the four approved religious institutions" (Chuanfu letter 1983, 14). And so on the spirit of the document, China's first advanced Nuns' Institute, called Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' Institute, was officially established.

In order to ensure the early completion of the college, Master Longlian devoted all her savings to construction. Under the great efforts of all, the dormitories and classrooms, the Hall of Jade Buddha and Library were built up one after another. After years of effort, these buildings have come into being. The stored books donated by the Buddhist Association include *Taisho Tripitaka*, *Zhonghua Tripitaka* and *fangshan stone Tripitaka*,

etc. President Zhao Puchu endowed the following name for the college: Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' College.⁹

SBNC was finally inaugurated on 1 November 1984. It is the first and only college of higher learning for nuns in China. Mr. Zhao Puchu was its honorary president while Master Longlian was the active president. Buddhist Kuanling from Wenshusi assumed the role of vice president, and Master Pianneng from Wuyuosi assumed the role of the dean.

Master Longlian, influenced by the situation of Buddhism in China, divided the nuns training into three purposes:

- (1) To train temple management personnel
- (2) To train Buddhist teaching personnel
- (3) To train Buddhist studying personnel

After students graduate, usually the minimum requirement for each student is for them to become management personnel of a temple. So the nuns are not only expected to learn Buddhism and cultural knowledge, but are also expected to learn many of the specific management methods, such as how to hold various types of ceremonies, how to establish formal financial accounts, etc.

SBNC offers courses in Buddhist studies, social sciences and humanities. The courses are taught on the basic theories of the major Buddhist schools and important Buddhist scriptures: history of Buddhism in India, history of Buddhism in China and Tibet, Buddhist regulations and rituals. Social science and humanities courses include modern and traditional Chinese arts and literature, Chinese history, Chinese philosophy, western philosophy, Chinese and Tibetan languages, calligraphy, sports and politics. The Buddhist studies are covered Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. The first course students mainly study Chinese Buddhism, whereas senior-level courses are organized like the *geshe*¹⁰ study programs of Tibetan Buddhist institutes. At the post-graduate level, classes on Tibetan literature and Tibetan Buddhist texts are also offered.

The Sichuan Buddhist nunnery is the only nunnery in China following the *Gelugpu*¹¹ (格鲁派) tradition. Tiexiangsi, reflects an unusual mixture of elements from different Buddhist traditions. The students here learn the doctrines, *Vinayas* and history of the three language sects of Buddhism. Life in Tiexiangsi presents also the same unusual juxtaposition of Chinese and Tibetan elements. The various activities in the monastic day are designated by Chinese words. Everyday life in Tiexiangsi follows the usual routine of Chinese monitories. But the meditation and scripture chanting are Tibetan in origin, the meditation practiced by the community is called *Contemplation on the Three Refuges* (三皈依观).¹² Longlian has written a handbook describing this method as “a basic practice of Tibetan meditation.” The *bhiksuni*s practice meditation every afternoon. Every

⁹ President Zhao Puchu was famous for endowing the names of many temples in China because he is a leader of Chinese Buddhism, and a famed calligrapher.

¹⁰ *Geshe* has successfully completed a Buddhist education in Tibetan tradition. In *Gelugpa*, *Geshe* usually requires 20 or 25 years of study.

¹¹ *Gelugpu* founded in Tibet in the 14th century by the monk scholar Tsongkhapa. The *Gelugpu* tradition is associated with the Dalai lama and the Panchen Lama, and has been the most influential school in Tibet since the 17th century.

¹² The text divides the meditative path into three stages: a preparatory practice; an analytical concentration on the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, and impermanence; and a ling esoteric concentration consisting of many intertwined visualization practices.

morning, the *bhiksuni*s assemble in the main hall to chant *Guru Puja* (上师供), a popular guru yoga text in the *gelupa* school. Longlian explain tantric practices associated with the Guru Puja. At the heart of this practice is the realization one's own guru. Every evening, *bhiksuni*s chant the *Original Five-syllable Mantra of Manjusri* (文殊五字根本真言).¹³ This text written by Nenghai, who said to received the approval of manjusri himself as the master was absorbed in meditation on Mt. Wutai. The students respect the Nenghai, Manjusri, and Tsongkhapa, which follow traditional Tibetan forms. In addition, another scripture chanting as is the rite performed on religious feast days, the *tsog foering* (会供).¹⁴

Tiexiangsi focuses on training *bhiksuni*s on Buddhist morality, mediation, and wisdom rather than receiving visitors from around the world. To provide a quite environment for the *bhiksuni*s, Tiexiangsi is not open to tourists. It is also a "closed" nunnery, which means that it is for the nuns only and is not open to laypeople for devotions. This is in contrast with other monasteries (Aidaotang Nunnery, for example), which welcome laypeople for daily meditation and other activities. Outsiders rarely come to Tiexiangsi. The students of this nunnery do not offer Buddhist services to lay people for money. Their expenses are covered by the school. The source of funding of this nunnery comes from the Government. The temple also received some donations from big temples. According to Master Longlian, Buddhism is a kind of education. The Buddhist temple is not a place of business or a place of tourism, so this institute is not open to the public for pilgrimage, or other Buddhist services. Commercialism leads to corruption in the Buddhist monastery and could be widespread in contemporary Chinese society. Thus, without the commercialism, the institute can remain as a sacred place for Buddhist practice. It doesn't mix Buddhism with business.

In the fall of 1987, the first batch of students graduated from this Sichuan Buddhist Nunnery. Some of them continued their studies in the same school for another three years. They started their teaching and research work in various localities in China. Others returned to the monasteries in the Buddhist associations.

In 1990, Master Longlian taught three classes: advanced class for research, as well as intermediate and elementary class. The schooling for each class is three years. She also set up a training class in Aidaotang with three years schooling. The students attending this preparatory class may continue their studies at the Sichuan Buddhist nuns' institute. Therefore, there are four levels of classes with 12 years of schooling at this institute.

SBNC was the well-known Buddhist College in china when Master Longlian was power because of her charisma influence. Many nuns have graduated from this institute, and are now working in different corners at home and abroad. They receive great acclaim from the society.

Difficulties and problems in development of the SBNC

Master Longlian founded SBNC and managed it well, which has been praised and nation wide. But Master Longlian was deterring in energy as she was more than 90 years old. When she left the Buddhist institute affairs to the students, SBNC faced many

¹³ An exoteric section, an explanation of the three trainings in *Vinaya*, *dhyāna*, and *prajñā*.

¹⁴ The monks or nuns celebrate the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, typical of Chinese Buddhism.

challenges. Some new disputes are continually growing. Her students fractioned into two different education attitudes: One group wants to inherit Master Longlian's experience which focuses on both Exoteric and Esoteric Sects. Another group, including the new president of SBNC, wants to focus on the Mahayana Eight Sects (Exoteric Sects), and play down the Esoteric practice. This is the greatest change to the college's curriculum. At the same time, there still remain some problems in the college, such as the lack of funds, lack of well-trained teachers and able persons, lack of sources and so forth. The new divergences mingled with old contradictions have seriously restricted the college's educational development. When Minnan Buddhist Nuns' College and Wutai Pushousi Buddhist Nuns' College develop quickly, SBNC went into decline because of discordant voices among the students, and not much improvement in development.

Reflection on educational system in SBNC

As the older generation gradually leaves the world, the younger generation is left to carry on the traditions, but it has not produced the same level of charismatic leaders or scholars who could shoulder the heavy responsibilities for future propagation and research. Now, many local temples have set up their own Buddhist nuns' colleges for the training of the young. After Master Longlian established the SBNC, many Buddhist nuns' colleges have been constructed throughout the China. All new generations have a good chance to study Buddhism at Nuns' Colleges. They receive both Buddhist and secular higher education.

*Bhiksuni*s who have graduated from such colleges go on to serve in different capacities, they establish the temple, promote Buddhist education, or are dedicated to charitable activities, etc. *Bhiksuni*s' education in china has developed greatly over the past 30 years and continues to develop, but there is still room for improvement, as the colleges still face challenges. All the colleges have similar problems as Mr. Wang Leiquan discussed in 1993.¹⁵ First, the individual colleges don't have any coordination in their programs. Usually, these colleges are small and far from being comprehensive. Second, these colleges mainly admit monks and nuns as students. They tend to neglect the education of lay Buddhists. Third, the leaders of these Buddhist colleges are not bold enough to introduce good experience and research work from overseas. Due to their limited sources, they are not aware of other Buddhist studies in the world, they lack contact with the outside, especially lack contact with Buddhist studies worldwide. Fourth, the syllabus seems old and incomplete as many topics are missing, including women's studies, sociology, languages, comparative religions, ethics, etc. These problems exist for both *bhiksus* and *bhiksuni*s in contemporary china. In the 21st century, how to solve the problems and discover the direction of the development of *bhiksuni*s' education is a long and difficult task.

Conclusion

Master Longlian was not only an exalted Buddhist scholar, but one who also worked hard to establish ordination for *bhiksuni*s, including both Tibetan *bhiksuni*s and Mahāyāna *bhiksuni*s. The first full ordination ceremony, in which Tibetan nuns received

¹⁵ Deng Zhimei, Review of Chinese Buddhist Education in 20th Century, *Buddhist cultural*, No.6, 1996

bhiksuni precepts, was held at Tiexiangsi in 1948 and supervised by *Bhiksuni*s Longlian. Tiexiangsi is the only Nunnery of full ordination for Tibetan *bhiksuni*s. Master Longlian also worked hard to re-establish dual ordination in China, which was absent from the Chinese Buddhist tradition for centuries. In 1982, Master Longlian held the first ceremonies since the 1950s for the full ordination of *bhiksuni*s.

Master Longlian's experience focuses on both Exoteric and Esoteric Sects. She was proficient in the Tibetan language, translated Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, and was one of the compilers of the *Great Chinese-Tibetan Dictionary* (汉藏字典) published in the 1950s. She devoted her life to spreading Tibetan Buddhist teachings in new land Sichuan. The Tiexiangsi is the only nunnery in China following the *Gelugpa* (格鲁派) tradition. Tiexiangsi reflects the Chinese Buddhist tradition of its cultural setting as well as the Tibetan Buddhist teachings in China. Life in Tiexiangsi presents the unusual juxtaposition of Chinese and Tibetan elements. Everyday life in Tiexiangsi follows the usual routine of Chinese monasteries. But the meditation and scripture chanting are Tibetan in origin, such as *Contemplation on the Three Refuges* (三皈依观), *Guru Puja* (上师供), *Original Five-syllable Mantra of Manjusri* (文殊五字根本真言), and *tsog foering* (会供). It can be seen in the daily life of the nunnery, the substance and content of the nun's practice – meditation, chanting services, and tantric teachings are all of Tibetan origin.

Master Longlian founded the first Buddhist Nuns' College in China, and had made outstanding contributions in the development of nuns' education. There are 14 Buddhist Nuns' Colleges or Institutes constructed, such as Minnan Buddhist Nuns' College and Pushou *Bhiksuni* Vinaya College. As we have seen in recent times, *bhiksuni*s in China are displaying strong determination to be involved in the teachings of the Buddha, and, together *bhiksuni*s, have shared the important task of educating the talented *bhiksuni*s in order to preserve and promote Buddhism.

Buddhist Nuns' College in Tiexiangsi Nunnery has evolved in relation to government policy shifts toward religion in China. In 1966, the onset of the Cultural Revolution had a disastrous effect on all aspects of the society in China, including religion. All religious sites were closed. All the nuns left Tiexiangsi, some of the buildings and sacred images sustained heavy damage. They moved to Aidaotang Nunnery, and stayed there until 1979 living side-by-side with workers who were employed in nearby factories or the government workshop in the nunnery complex.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1979, the communist party insists on a new policy of freedom in religious beliefs. Five religions have since been allowed to operate under the auspices of the patriotic associations. Monks and nuns were gradually to return to religious life, Longlian and her community regained most of the property associated with Tiexiangsi. They assisted by government funds, began restoring the damaged buildings and Buddha images.

In 1983, Zhao Puchu, President of BAC, agreed to set up Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' Institute, and authorities approved the Master Longlian's proposal to set up this college. The Third Plenum of the 11th after the implementation of religious policies, according to the "Office of the State Council transmitted the State Council's Religious Affairs Bureau" and the "Sichuan Provincial People's Government", and so, on the spirit of the document, China's first Sichuan Buddhist Nuns' College was officially established in Tiexiangsi.

The foundation of SBNC is just an individual case in the history of Buddhist education in China, nevertheless, the real value of its research lies in its ability to inspire Chinese contemporary Buddhist education as a whole, and the task now is to re-examine the real problems and resolve the issues of Buddhist Education and the society.

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