

RESEARCH

Open Access



Chinese *Bhiksunis* in contemporary China: beliefs and practices on Three-Plus-One Project

Rujing Mao

Correspondence: maolujin@163.com
College of Religious Studies
Mahidol University, 999
Putthamonthon Road 4 Salaya,
73170 Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth study of Pushou Temple to examine the achievements of *bhiksunis* in terms of Dharma practice, education, and charitable work in contemporary China. Although it presents a case study on just one order of *bhiksunis*, the author hopes to demonstrate that the practices of this order is significant for *bhiksunis* throughout contemporary China.

What makes the *bhiksunis* of Pushou Temple so significant? For one, the abbess of Pushou Temple, Bhiksuni Rurui (b. 1957), is an influential member of the Chinese Buddhist community as she is the only female of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) since 2010. Bhiksuni Rurui emphasizes the precepts as the corner stone of Sangha education, so much so that, in 1992, she founded the Wutai Mountain Bhiksuni College (WMBC) located on the grounds of Pushou Temple. The WMBC was originally founded as a *vinaya* training center and has developed rapidly into a *vinaya* practice center. Gradually, it expanded its activities and developed an education program and charitable work. Bhiksuni Rurui began what she calls the “Three-Plus-One Sangha Education Project” (henceforth, TPO) in 2005. Pushou Temple has three branches: Dacheng Temple, Bodhi Love Charity Association (BLCA), and Qingtai Anyang Garden (QAG). This paper will document the aforementioned activities as a current example of female monastic training and practice in China.

Keywords: Pushou Temple; Bhiksuni Rurui; Vinaya practice; Sangha education; Charitable work

Introducing Pushou Temple

This paper investigates the rise of the female monastic movement in contemporary China, from 1949 to the present day, by studying a community of *bhiksunis* at Pushou Temple, located at the sacred site of Mount Wutai [1] in Shanxi Province of northeast China. Pushou Temple was established between 1086 and 1090, originally for *bhikṣus*. It was once known as the Great Huayan Temple. In 1908, at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), it was designated as the temple of the 13th Dalai Lama of Tibet (Thubten Gyatsom, 1876–1933). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), all Buddha images in the temple were damaged. In 1991, Bhiksuni Rurui and Bhiksuni Miaoyin, both disciples of Ven. Tongyuan, re-established Pushou Temple as a *bhiksuni* temple, which was later established as a female *vinaya* training center. The Pushou Temple *bhiksunis* hold the Buddhist dharma and *vinaya* as their teachers.

The focus of *vinaya* education has both a theoretical significance and practical value as it applies *vinaya* theories and knowledge to daily practice. In recent years, a “Pushou

bhiksuni” seems to have become synonymous with an image of a well disciplined, fully ordained Buddhist nun. The reputation of Pushou Temple has spread throughout the China. Therefore, many young women have become attracted to monastic discipline and have decided to practice the dharma at Pushou Temple. As Pushou Temple places emphasis on the significance of vinaya education, more than 1,000 *bhiksunis* study and practice the *vinaya* in the college. Over the past couple decades Pushou Temple has received thousands of students from China, as well as Singapore, Malaysia, and the United States. It has become the most popular college for *vinaya* practice in contemporary China. In fact, compared with other colleges and temples, it has become the most popular and the largest *bhikṣuṇī* temple in China.

Method

The research conducted for this paper employed qualitative methods, using mainly three approaches to data collection: documentary research, participant observation, and interviews. For documentary research, the author employed both primary and secondary sources, in English and Chinese. For fieldwork, the author incorporated a participant-observer technique and conducted interviews with over ten key informants. These informants include *bhiksus*, *bhiksunis*, laymen, and laywomen. One of the main informants was Bhiksuni Hong, the disciple of Bhiksuni Rurui, who is also a dharma teacher and manager of Pushou Temple. She served as my guide at the temple throughout my fieldwork, introduced me to other key informants whom I could interview, and provided useful information about the TPO project. The participant-observer approach complemented my documentary research and interviews. It allowed me access to various activities at the temple, which allowed me to categorize relevant information, while also provided me the opportunity to better gauge and judge *bhiksuni* attitudes and opinions. A number of the participatory observations were made even prior to the start of my doctoral research, while I was a student and dharma teacher for ten years (1998–2007) in the famous Minnan Buddhist College. Most recently, as a doctoral candidate, I spent the month of September 2014 observing key aspects of the *bhiksuni*’ dharma practice, education, and charitable work at Pushou Temple, Dacheng Temple, the Bodhi Love Charity Association, and Qingtai Anyang Garden.

Master Rurui: founder of the Three-Plus-One Project

Bhiksuni Rurui is the most well known *bhiksuni* in China, as she is the abbess of Pushou Temple, and president of Wutai Mountain Bhiksuni College (WMBC), a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and vice president of the Buddhist Association of Shanxi Province. Her dedication and work has been recognized throughout the country.

Bhiksuni Rurui was born in Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province in 1957. Her parents were devout Buddhists. Under the influence of her family, she began reciting the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva from a very early age. She is full of compassion and benevolence since her childhood, always taking pleasure in helping others. In 1980, she graduated from the Taiyuan Normal College, and became a nun one year later. During her nun career, she was able to study with various famous Buddhist masters, both *bhiksus* and

bhiksunis [2]. One such master, Ven. Bhikṣu Shengyi (1922–2010) of Hong Kong, for example, taught her that if we want “to generate bodhicitta, first we need to know how to help ourselves” [3]. Another master, Ven. Bhikṣu Mengcan (b. 1915) taught her to uphold a verse: “If a hot iron wheel is wheeling above your head, your bodhi mind is lost for fear of its bitterness” [4]. Then there is Ven. Bhiksuni Longlian (1909–2006), who was considered the first outstanding *bhiksuni* in contemporary China. Bhiksuni Rurui was the first assistant to Master Longlian, and helped her in planning the construction of the Sichuan Buddhist Bhiksuni College. Perhaps the most influential individual for Bhiksuni Rurui is Ven. Master Tongyun (1913–1991), her tutor master. Master Tongyun devoted her life to propagate the vinaya. Ven. Rurui spent ten years studying the vinaya under Master Tongyun at the Auspicious Vinaya Monastery. Ven. Rurui’s studies here served as the foundation for her future establishment of her Bhiksuni Vinaya College.

Master Tongyun wished to set up a public monastery (Chinese: *Shifang Conglin*) for *bhiksuni* to study and practice the vinaya, but she wasn’t able to fulfill this dream. After her master passed away in March 1991, Ven. Rurui and Ven. Miaoyin decided to respect the wish of their master by establishing Pushou Temple. At that time, the Cultural Revolution, all Buddha images were damaged. The only remaining image was of the Heaven King Hall (Chinese: *Tianwang Dian*), which looked as if it could collapse at any time. When she saw the scene, she penned a few words on the residual blackboard “following Master Tongyuan’s will; loving the Nation and Buddhism; building a temple all our own; Amitābha Buddha” [5]. Ven. Rurui put together a small amount of seed money (RMB 105Yuan) to begin construction of the temple in 1991. She worked with her nun students and laypeople to build the temple brick by brick. The scripture hall, dining hall, main hall, wing rooms, as well as guest rooms, were each built one by one. There are rooms and halls of different Buddhist holy figures from the ruins of the historical Pushou Temple in Mount Wutai. Finally, a year later, the college began enrolling students. Master Rurui served as president, and also taught the dharma and *bhiksuni* precepts, serving as a senior ordination master, cultivating a generation of Chinese bhiksunis. The temple’s mission is to improve the *bhiksuni*’ self quality, and to instill an attitude of loving one’s nation and Buddhism. After two decades of their existence, the WMBC has become the largest *bhiksuni* vinaya college in China. The college is known for its strict adherence to the disciplines, and Rurui serves as an exemplar. Ven. Rurui instructed *bhiksunis* to practice the vinaya strictly and to be real Buddhists. She encourages “integration of learning and practice”. All monastic persons should strictly adhere to the religious disciplines. So far, the college has trained many vinaya teachers who devoted themselves to preaching the dharma in other bhiksuni colleges throughout China. Therefore, Ven. Rurui has made great contributions toward perfecting and preaching the *bhiksuni vinaya* in contemporary China.

Ven. Rurui devotes her life to not only vinaya teaching, but also to providing care and services for women farmers and children who are not able to get an education in the villages, as well as to orphans and elders. She also benefits sentient beings and society by promoting Buddhist culture and developing social work, such as the TPO project established in 2005. Master Rurui, who designed the project, says that the four facilities have different functions. For example, Pushou Si is a base for cultivating Buddhist doctrines, where students spend most of their time learning and researching Buddhist

knowledge. Dacheng Si, on the other hand, is an education base, where students can take courses related to Buddhism and the humanities, such as ancient Chinese, history, philosophy, foreign language and calligraphy. The Bodhi Love Charity Association (BLCA) promotes Buddhist culture, while Qingtai Anyang Garden (QAG) provides nursing services to senior citizens, and it is the first contribution sponsored by the BLCA to give back to society [6]. Master Rurui encourages her students to practice a *bodhisattva* spirit, to enable every student to become a qualified and happy Buddhist nun, who will help guide people toward an optimistic life, making contributions to society with a merciful heart.

The Three-Plus-One Project

Bhiksuni Rurui’s dharma career has focused on creating a program of vinaya training and practice that is a paragon for female renunciants in contemporary China. Thus, she came up with the Three-Plus-One Project. In this moniker, “Three” refers to the three main endeavors of the nuns at the temple: dharma practice, education, and charitable work. First, regarding dharma practice, Pushou Temple provides an extensive program for the study and practice of *bhiksuni vinaya*. The *vinaya* precepts of monastic discipline are given significant emphasis in this system as a cornerstone of *bhiksuni* training. Second, regarding education, Dacheng Temple was established as a venue for providing *sangha* education programs for the *bhiksunis*. Third, regarding charitable work, the Bodhi Love Charity Association (BLCA) was established as a vehicle for reaching out to the community through social service activities. Bhiksuni Rurui promulgates the cultivation of the *bodhisattva*’s altruistic view and encourages all her students to practice the *bodhisattva* spirit: to benefit sentient beings and society, to promote Buddhist culture, and to engage in charitable work. The “One” in the moniker refers to Qingtai Anyang Garden (QAG), a charitable project for the elderly Fig. 1.

Dharma practice at Pushou Temple

The first item in the TPO Project at Pushou Temple is dharma practice. The guidance given for dharma practice is “to follow the spirit of the *Avatamsaka* School and observe the precepts of behavior, with a vow to be reborn in the Pure Land.” Among these objectives, Pushou Temple puts particular emphasis on the study and practice of the *vinaya* precepts. The *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* is the most important *vinaya* in China, and it lays the foundation for monastic life. According to the Dharmaguptaka School,

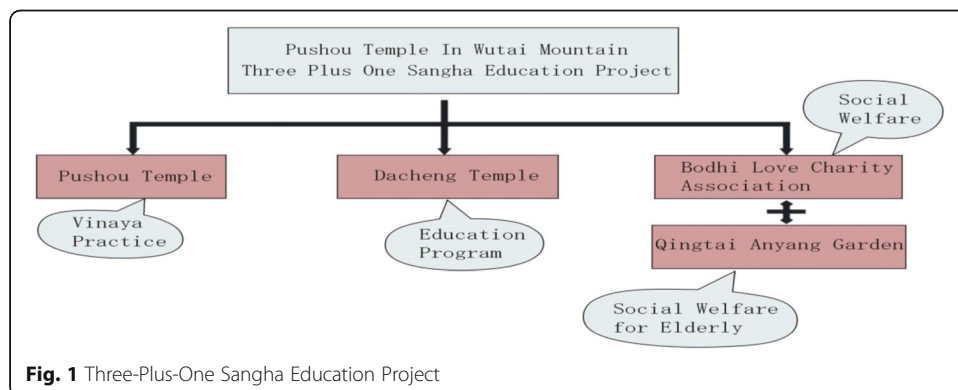


Fig. 1 Three-Plus-One Sangha Education Project

bhiksunis follow the 348 full monastic precepts and receive dual ordination. They also follow the bodhisattva precepts and take bodhisattva ordination.

In contemporary China, the practice of *bhiksuni vinaya* is best exemplified at Pushou Temple's WMBC. The college attaches great importance to the study and practice of *vinaya*, beginning from the *xiaozhong* (小眾) stage up to *bhiksuni* [7]. Students first learn the *sramaneri* precepts, then the *siksamana* precepts, and finally receive the *bhiksuni* and *bodhisattva* precepts.

If a young laywoman wants to enroll in the college, she must first pass a written examination and an interview. Bhiksuni Hong informed me that when a young laywoman enrolls in the college she needs to train in the dharma and adapt to temple life for one year. During this time, she is trained in how to walk, eat, dress, lie when sleeping, how to make her bed, pack belongings for a journey, enter the great shrine hall, and make prostrations before a Buddha image. She is expected to do at least 50,000 prostrations during that year, and be able to fluently recite the morning and evening chants. The focus of the college is to examine the students' dedication and to train them both physically and mentally. If they meet the required standards, they are allowed to enter the *sangha* (Chinese: 出家, Skt.: *pravrajya*) and ordain as a *sramaneri*, one who goes from home to homelessness.

Once they have entered the monastic order, students at the college need to train in the ten precepts of a *sramaneri* for at least one year, and must complete a minimum of 50,000 prostrations to the Buddha. Each day they perform prostrations of repentance according to the Repentance Ceremony of the 88 Buddhas. They also need to recite *The Door of Excellent Deportment*, *The Daily Vinaya Observances*, and *The Synopsis of Sramaneri Vinaya* chants. The focus of the training for *sramaneris* is to strengthen their determination to practice, improve their exemplary deportment, and enable them to adapt to the *sangha* life they have chosen. When they have met the required standards of the college, displaying a good knowledge of the dharma and the discipline, they will have successfully completed the 1-year Pushou training. They then are ordained as postulants (*siksamana*).

According to the special requirements for female practitioners set forth by the Buddha, *siksamanas* need to strictly observe six precepts [8] for two years before obtaining higher ordination as a *bhiksuni* [9]. If a *siksamana* transgresses any one of these rules, she has to start again from the beginning. She must meet the requirement of two continuous years of training without even the slightest transgression. In fact, *siksamana* training is the preparatory testing period for receiving higher ordination. During these two years of training, *siksamanas* focus on practicing the six precepts and the exemplary deportment of a nun. In addition, they need to recite and memorize *The Sutra in 42 Sections Spoken by the Buddha*, *The Scripture of the Bequeathed Teachings*, and other materials that are relevant to the training for *bhiksuni* ordination.

Altogether, it generally takes approximately four years for a laywoman to achieve *bhiksuni* status. After becoming a *bhiksuni*, she may then take up to six years to complete her study of *vinaya* in the Department of Vinaya Studies. There are three levels of study in the Department of Vinaya Studies: elementary *vinaya*, intermediate *vinaya*, and advanced *vinaya*. Each level of *vinaya* study may take two years to complete. The elementary *vinaya* class is part of the pre-college program, whereas the intermediate and advanced *vinaya* classes make up the undergraduate program. In the

elementary *vinaya* class, the primary goal is to study what constitutes wholesome and unwholesome behavior. Students who meet the standards by successfully passing the exams may progress to the intermediate level. When they reach the advanced level, studies entail an in-depth study of the *Dharmagupta Vinaya*, and *Zi Chi Ji* [10]. In addition, they must learn the *Karman Suitable to Local Conditions*, and *Nanshan Three Big* (in eighty volumes) [11]. By intensively focusing on the study of *vinaya* for six years, *bhiksunis* develop a solid basis of knowledge and discipline that serves as a foundation for the practice of meditation, wisdom, and teaching Dharma.

At the college, it takes ten years to complete the study of *vinaya* from *xiaozhong* up to *bhiksuni*. The college attaches great importance to the stages that focus on the study and practice of *vinaya*, including a thorough understanding of the *upasika*, *sramaneri*, *siksamana*, and *bhiksuni* rules of training. As such, the college is one of the most important *vinaya* colleges in China. Through a comprehensive investigation of the day-to-day practice of *bhiksuni vinaya*, the nuns come to an in-depth understanding of the lifestyle of a *bhiksuni* who practices *vinaya* strictly – practices that are steadfastly maintained at Pushou Temple. The lifestyle of a *bhiksuni* is simple and severe. All of them try their best to live according to Buddhist *vinaya*.

The focus on *vinaya* study at the college is not simply theoretical, but is put into practice in everyday conduct, as the nuns apply the theory of *vinaya* to their daily lives. At all times and in all situations, they cultivate the precepts and strictly maintain exemplary deportment. All of the *bhiksunis'* words and deeds follow the *vinaya* guidelines carefully. Whether walking, standing, sitting, or sleeping, they observe all rules and regulations. The *bhiksunis* at Pushou Temple give precedence to *vinaya* and the Buddhadharma as their teacher. Over the past two decades, Pushou Temple has received thousands of students from China and from the United States, Singapore, and Malaysia. Not only has it become the most popular college for women interested in *vinaya* practice in contemporary China, it has also become the most popular and largest *bhiksuni* temple in China. As a consequence, the temple receives substantial donations.

The *vinaya* training at Pushou Temple is representative of female monastic training at other temples in China. The reputation of Pushou Temple has spread far and wide, and so *bhiksunis* both local and international study there. Undoubtedly, the standards of *vinaya* practice in contemporary China will have a direct and vital effect on the future development of Buddhism in the country. The nuns believe that an accurate interpretation and strong practice of the *vinaya* is key to making Buddhist traditions available to interested parties in the future. It is also the key to ensuring that Buddhist traditions can maintain a stable presence in China as the nation evolves, both in the short-term and long-term.

Education programs

Buddhist talents play a key role in both cultivating and propagating the dharma. When talking about the primary tasks in Buddhism, Zhao Puchu, the former president of the Buddhist Association of China, once said that the three most important things leading to success in the training and education of monks and nuns are to “foster talent, foster talent, and foster talent” [12]. Regarding the direction of development of Chinese Buddhist education guided by the state agencies, the Former

Minister of SARA, Ye Xiaowen, states that “it is essential for students to be capable of preserving the good in traditional Buddhism; foreign languages must be practiced fluently; and the students ought to take part in work for society with good training” [13]. Therefore, the sangha and the state agencies share similar attitudes towards the development of Chinese Buddhist education in China.

These days, Chinese *bhiksunis* have roughly the same opportunities as *bhikṣus* as far as education is concerned. Buddhist education is currently esteemed and promoted in China. The present prosperous economic conditions and more liberal religious policies have created a conducive climate for the college’s development, and provided the nuns with adequate financial resources to pursue their education.

Under Chinese law, religious organizations are based on the principle of separation of religion and politics, religious education is separate from state education. Religious educational colleges cannot be established without approval from the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), which is a functioning department of the State Council, which oversees religious affairs and issues for the People’s Republic of China [14]. Bhiksuni Rurui founded WMBC for nuns in 1992, which was approved by the SARA.

The state policy clearly states that “self-support, self-administration, and self-management” must be the principle concept held by all religious educational organizations in China. Therefore, Chinese sangha education run their own affairs independently and set up religious schools, publish religious classics and periodicals, and run social services according to their own needs.

In the long-term plan for the TPO Project, the WMBC has been designated as the educational venue. Regarding the “cultivation of *bhiksuni* talent,” the WMBC follows the dictum: “The monastery becomes the academy and the academy becomes the monastery. Learning and practice are integrated. Students live a temple life” [15]. In this formulation, monastic education serves both the intellectual and the spiritual aims of the Buddhist clergy. Thus, the goal of the college is to provide both improved educational opportunities for *bhiksunis* and better training in applying the teachings in their dharma practice.

Since Master Rurui is influenced by the teaching style of her late master, Bhiksuni Tongyuan, who followed the *vinaya* strictly, taught Buddhism from an *Avatamsaka* perspective, [16] and practiced in the Pure Land tradition. Therefore, the curriculum at WMBC covers all eight schools of Chinese Buddhist thought [17]. Even so, the courses give priority to extensive discussions of *vinaya* and *Avatamsaka* philosophy, concluding with an exhortation to follow the Pure Land path.

WMBC offers a 4-year undergraduate program and a 3-year postgraduate program. New student nuns between the ages of 20 and 33 from various provinces and cities enroll every two years. Even though the overall number of monastic students across China is decreasing, more than a thousand *bhiksunis* are now studying at the college.

Bhiksunis who graduate from WMBC go on to serve in different capacities. They establish temples, promote Buddhist education, dedicate themselves to charitable activities, among other things. For over twenty years now, WMBC has been helping students develop a deep knowledge of Buddhism and excellent ethical principles. WMBC has grown in strength under the industrious dedication of successive teams of instructors and administrators, and has become famed as an outstanding college for

Buddhist *vinaya* studies with a track record of training many qualified *bhiksunis* who exemplify proper monastic decorum and character. Since its inception, the college has also served as training ground for prospective faculty to staff local Buddhist colleges and help spread the Buddhist teachings.

Charitable work

Buddhist charitable work deals with the concepts and religious values of Buddhist social work, which is built on the spiritual concepts of greater compassion, humanistic Buddhism, and accumulation of merit. Compassion is the core value in Master Rurui's leadership. Because of her great mercy and compassion, she founded the Bodhi Love Charity Association (BLCA) for social welfare in 2005, and registered it as an association or legal corporation under the Civil Affairs Bureau of Yuci District, Shanxi Province. The BLCA held its opening ceremony on November 19, 2005.

In the TPO Project, the BLCA is positioned to do charitable work, serving as a broad platform of communications between four kinds of Buddhists. The major tasks of the association are: (1) Buddhist education for laypeople; (2) Qingtai Anyang Garden for the elderly; (3) strengthening links with other public welfare organizations and religious groups, especially exchanging knowledge and promoting cooperation on Buddhist education and welfare projects; and (4) supervising relief efforts.

Bhiksuni Rurui and the BLCA volunteers remind themselves not to seek comfort for themselves, but to dedicate themselves to relieving the sufferings of others. Over the years, they have implemented a number of projects to benefit people suffering from poverty, such as those living in Guangling County, Louzigou Village, and Beihu Village. BLCA is active in providing necessities such as rice and bread to the elderly, the poor, and to seriously ill patients in difficult circumstances, especially in the villages. Since 2007, the association has made annual donations of rice and bread worth RMB 18,000 Yuan [18].

Bhiksuni Rurui encourages other social welfare activities, including relief to those suffering from natural disasters, such as the severe earthquake that hit Sichuan Province in 2008. Bhiksuni Rurui led more than 100 nun students in a campaign to raise funds for the Wutai Association, which collected RMB 56,152 Yuan for earthquake-stricken areas. Meanwhile, Dacheng Temple held a Xizai assembly, which is a Chinese Buddhist ritual of releasing the dead from their suffering and praying for blessings. More than 800 Buddhists joined these assemblies. By calling on those assembled to donate funds to the earthquake victims, Bhiksuni Rurui was able to collect over RMB 300,000 Yuan. BLCA members are now trained to deal with disasters of all kinds, including earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes, with empathy and skillful means. From 2005 to 2011, BLCA donated a total of RMB 600,000 Yuan to relieve the sufferings of those afflicted by floods and earthquakes [19].

The BLCA regularly organizes activities such as tree planting, releasing living beings, among other activities. When BLCA organizes tree-planting activities, Master Rurui is able to gather large teams of laypeople to participate. For a tree-planting activity at Qingtai Anyang Garden (QAG), for example, she inspired the laypeople to raise a large amount of money to support the purchase and maintenance of the trees; for one event in May 2009 alone, the lay people provided RMB 38,948 Yuan to buy saplings [20]. Trees were planted on each triangle of the QAG to help protect the environment.

When the BLCA organizes events to liberate living beings at QAG, Bhiksuni Rurui teaches people the significance of cultivating compassion and loving kindness for all sentient beings, with the aim of promoting peace in human society.

BLCA has carried out social service projects to meet the needs of China's increasingly aging population. QAG's charitable work for the elderly is their primary project, sponsored by the BLCA. The four cornerstones of this work is to repay kindnesses received, [21] alleviate the miseries of the disadvantaged, practice filial piety, [22] and share the government's burden. Master Rurui said "I love you — kind old people— my parents, I will set up QAG to offer you" on May 11, 2011 [23]. This is Master Rurui's manifested filial piety to elders. The objectives of the QAG also include realizing certain specific ideals, namely, to ensure that seniors are supported, that they have something to learn, that they can do something, that they have doctors to care for them when they are sick, and that they die peacefully when their life ends. It is significant that these ideals, which are derived from traditional Chinese cultural values, are now being revived and implemented within a Buddhist framework.

QAG provides nursing home services for its followers who are over 60 years old. The project currently serves more than 30 elderly residents. All of the residents are Buddhists and they include senior *bhiksus*, *bhiksunis*, *sramaneris*, laymen, and laywomen. The majority of the elderly at QAG are female. Laywoman Mrs. Gong, 80 years old, is from the local area, Yuci City. She said that when she came to the temple five years ago, she was terribly ill with diabetes, high blood pressure, and gall bladder disease. She often had to take medicine and receive injections. But after living in the QAG, with a strict vegetarian diet, care from volunteers, spiritual counseling by the dharma masters and a quiet living environment, her physical health has grown stronger. "I used to be a heavy burden to my son when I was sick. Now I am healthy and they can visit me whenever they are available. I think it is the best choice for me," she says [24]. Although she is still capable of taking care of herself, volunteers help her clean her room regularly. Sramaṇeri Longxian is 73 years old. Her daughter is a senior *bhiksuni* who has been living in Pushou Temple for several years [25]. She not only can take care of herself, but also help other elders. "Everyone helps each other here. I like the atmosphere," she said [26]. Bhiksuni Renguang, 99 years old, the oldest member of the QAG, is Master Rurui's aunt. She is the senior *bhiksuni* whom people respect most. When people arrive at the QAG, she is considered priority on the visitor's agenda; she always bestows her blessing, wishing everyone good health and longevity.

The QAG has a team of volunteers who help care for these elderly residents, most of whom are women, both *bhiksunis* and laywomen. More than 30 nun-students from the college volunteer to care for the elderly at QAG. The *bhiksunis* and laywomen play in implementing and expressing Buddhist values such as kindness, caring concern, humility, patience. The *bhiksunis* and laywomen treat elders just as their own parents. The elders have the best of care and are full of gratitude.

The BLCA support those who stay in the QAG. All of them are provided for free of charge. Bhiksuni Bao said: "the funds are raised through donations from Buddhists. People who are willing to stay in the QAG do not need to pay a penny as long as they can follow the temple's disciplines" [27]. Master Rurui says it is the temple's responsibility to provide a peaceful environment for its believers who are in need.

However, the *bhiksunis* charitable work projects of the Bodhi Love Charity Association and Qingtai Anyang Garden are still very much under development. When compared with the Tzu Chi Foundation, their Buddhist social welfare projects are still in its infancy. At the moment, the groups are quite small, and lack qualified professionals who are trained in social welfare. In mainland China, *bhiksuni* social work is still in its primary stage, and is not as well developed when compared with Tzu Chi in terms of the depth and breadth of its social engagement. The questions expressed by the Bhiksuni Order as to how mainland *bhiksunis* can improve their social work activities represent a common concern. However, Tzu Chi's successful organizational system helps and inspires BLCA and other charitable groups in mainland China. Master Zhengyan's social work serves as a great model for *bhiksunis* on the mainland to be more influential in the field of charity. It is especially necessary for those involved to improve their skills and practices.

The evolution of the Three-Plus-One Project

The primary focus of my research has been the Three-Plus-One Project at Pushou Temple. From the data I have gathered, I conclude that the *bhiksunis* at the temple have made valuable contributions to Buddhist practice, education, and charitable work in contemporary China. Although much of their work is related to Buddhism and its development, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that their activities have broader social implications.

Bhiksuni Rurui began the construction of Pushou Temple with great difficulty. However, as Pushou Temple and Wutai Mountain Bhiksuni College became famous for their outstanding Dharma practice, they began to receive more and more donations from the lay community, especially from successful entrepreneurs such as Mr. Yang Zhao. As a result, the facilities at Pushou Temple have greatly improved over the last decade. All buildings at Pushou Temple are now complete, including well-stocked libraries, advanced multi-function classrooms, and bright reading rooms. These days, more than 1,000 *bhiksunis* are able to study and practice the Dharma through the Three-Plus-One Project.

After she entered the monastic community, Bhiksuni Rurui became an exemplary dharma teacher. In addition, she has produced many outstanding *bhiksunis* who have been crucial in replicating the TPO Project at other monasteries in China. These nuns have made significant contributions to Buddhism and to society in general, often playing essential roles in the construction and restoration of temples, the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, and the organization of social and charitable activities. They have been instrumental in relieving the sufferings of living beings and bringing practical benefits to large numbers of people, selflessly and continuously dedicating their energies to social service. The *bhiksunis'* conscientious efforts have resulted in widespread community support for the *bhiksunis*, which has enabled them to implement numerous successful social welfare projects.

The work of the *bhiksunis* at Pushou Temple has helped to create new opportunities for Chinese women. The networks that these nuns have created through their Dharma practice, education programs, and charitable activities have been beneficial not only to thousands of *bhiksunis*, but have also been tremendously valuable for all kinds of women in China. Some of the women who choose to ordain will remain nuns for the rest of their lives; others will not. But the benefits that derive from their experience are

sure to have positive effects on the broader society in a variety of ways, notably, transforming public perceptions of Buddhist nuns and their capabilities.

Challenges for the Three-Plus-One Project

Pushou Temple is a young organization with a history of little more than twenty years. Although the hardships of the temple's early years are now behind them, the *bhiksunis* still face a number of problems and challenges as they go about their work. The first challenge is to develop a coherent, integrated educational curriculum. Even though there has been much progress in *bhiksuni* education at WMBC, several issues still inhibit the *bhiksunis'* access to the complete benefits of Buddhist education. Most crucially, they lack a well-structured teaching system, sufficient teaching materials, and a full range of courses on issues of contemporary relevance, such as aging and end-of-life counseling. The college also faces difficulties in finding teachers who are qualified to teach various aspects of Buddhist studies and also lacks connections with other distinguished Buddhist colleges, institutes, and universities around the world.

The *bhiksunis* and supporters of the Bodhi Love Charity Association and Qingtai Anyang Garden face difficulties developing their social service projects. Buddhist charitable efforts are still in their infancy. At the moment, these organizations lack professionals who are trained in charitable social work to help guide their expanding activities.

The *bhiksunis* also face serious demographic challenges. As a result of a Chinese government policy established in 1982, Chinese couples are only allowed to have one child. This makes it difficult for women, who may be their parents' only child, to become a monastic. As a result, Buddhist colleges will naturally attract fewer applicants and the number of young women seeking monastic education and training at Pushou Temple will decline. The future direction of the monastery's programs is therefore uncertain. Despite these challenges, the *bhiksunis* of the Three-Plus-One Project are determined to face these problems resolutely and work out creative solutions. In an age of globalization and multiculturalism, they continually make efforts to improve their dharma practice, knowledge base, and charitable work, so that they will be effective and flexible in meeting the needs of a rapidly changing society.

A College in a temple

Bhiksuni Rurui has attempted to build Pushou Temple into a college-style temple and to build Dacheng Temple into a temple-style college. In addition, she has created the BLCA to serve as a broad platform for communications among the various segments of the four-fold Buddhist community and QAG as a field for nun students to cultivate renunciation and compassion. In recent years, Pushou Temple has expanded, with three branches and ever more functions. It has been successful in attracting a large number of Buddhists to participate in the TPO Project. The qualities and contributions of the nuns at Pushou Temple have made the monastic lifestyle attractive to a growing number of talented young women. With the knowledge and experience they have gained, the Chinese *bhiksunis* who have received training at the temple are demonstrating their capabilities in many fields, ranging from religious practice to temple construction, education, charitable work, and more. Many of these developments have been possible due to a favorable economic and social climate. As surely as all other living beings, the

bhiksunis of Pushou Temple will need to face the uncertainties of a precarious world. Despite these uncertainties, as *bhiksunis* in contemporary China become better educated, trained, and disciplined, they are growing exponentially stronger and better prepared to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

Suggestion for further research

The present research focused on the “Three-Plus-One Project” which concerns the *bhiksunis*’ dharma practice, the educational program, the charitable work, and the daily life practices at Pushou Temple in China. Due to the limited scope and time, this paper could not include a comprehensive investigation of all Buddhist women in China; this paper also could not compare this temple with temples in other countries. Despite its shortcomings, I hope that this paper will encourage future studies on women in Chinese Buddhism from all and any historical periods, including detailed studies of individual *bhiksunis* and their monasteries, and further illuminate how Buddhist women in China are inspiring and transmitting for future generations the world’s oldest and continuous Bhiksuni Sangha tradition. Therefore, there are many interesting topics worthy of further investigation, such as “A comparative study of Chinese Bhiksunis and Bhiksunis in other countries”; “The social circumstances of the Bhiksunis who enter the Bhiksuni Sangha in China”; and “Other case studies of other *bhiksuni* temples in China”.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Received: 24 April 2015 Accepted: 18 August 2015

Published online: 28 August 2015

References

1. Mt. Wutai is one of the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism. Mt. Wutai is also a destination for pilgrims traveling from afar to pay respect to the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, who is regarded as the lord of the mountain.
2. Ven. Bhikṣu Benhuan, Ven. Bhikṣu Mengcan, Ven. Bhikṣu Shengyi, Ven. Bhikṣu Kuanlin, Ven. Bhikṣu Zangbao, Ven. Bhikṣuni Longlian, and Ven. Bhikṣuni Tongyuan.
3. *Bodhicitta*: combination of the Sanskrit words bodhi and citta. Bodhi means “awakening” or “enlightenment”. Citta means mind or consciousness. *Bodhicitta* translated as “awakening mind” or “mind of enlightenment”.
4. Chinese: 香港的圣一老和尚教导如瑞法师:“发菩提心先度自己” 参老和尚以其在厄难中常持诵的一偈“假使热铁轮於我顶上悬,终不以此故,退失菩提心”教授如瑞法师。
5. Chinese: 继承上通下愿老法师遗愿,爱国爱教,自己动手修建寺庙,阿弥陀佛!
6. Ye Shan and Zhang Jiamin (2009), “Peace of Mind Meditative Life Inside Pushou Temple’s Women Buddhists’ Institute”, *Women of China*, Beijing: Women of China Foreign Language Press, No.07, pp.38–43.
7. The Chinese word *xiaozhong* (小众) includes laypeople, *sramaneri*, and *siksamanas*.
8. The six precepts in *Dharmaguptakavinaya* are: (1) abstinence from unchastity; touting a man, (2) abstinence from stealing, (3) abstinence from killing, (4) abstinence from false speech, (5) abstinence from eating at improper times, and (6) abstinence from intoxicants.(from *Taisho Tripitaka* T.22, p.924.)
9. Even though a *siksamana* trains in only six precepts, a *siksamana* is considered to have a higher level of training than a *sramaneri*. The six *siksamana* precepts are based on the ten precepts of a *sramaneri*, along with some of the *bhiksuni* precepts, and are almost equivalent to the *bhiksuni* precepts.
10. *Zi Chi Ji* (资持记, *Taisho Tripitaka* T.40): It is additional commentary on *Dharmaguptakavinaya* by Bhikṣu Yuan Chao (1048-1116AD). Its full name is *Sifenlu xingshi chao Zichiji* (四分律行事钞资持记) in 16 volumes. It is also called *Xingshi chao Zichiji* (行事钞资持记).
11. *Nanshan Three Big* (南山三大部) (eighty volume八十卷): They are “*Si-fen Lu Shan-fan Pu-que Xing-shi chao* 四分律删繁补阙行事钞”, An Abridged and Explanatory Commentary on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (*Taisho Tripitaka* T.1804); “*Si-fen Lu Bi-gju Han-zhu Jie-ben* (*Taisho Tripitaka* T.1806. 四分律比丘含注戒本); “*Si-fen Lu Shu-ji Jie-mo-shu* (*Taisho Tripitaka* T.1809, 四分律随机羯磨疏)”. The three books, commentaries on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*, were written by commentator Daoxun (596-667AD), who is the founder of *Dharmaguptakavinaya* School in China.
12. Zhao Puchu (赵朴初), (1992), Talks at the forum on Chinese Buddhist education, *The Voice of Dharma*, Beijing: The Voice of Dharma Press, No.3, P.3.
13. Ye Xiaowen (叶小文) Chief editor, (2007), Hu Shaojie (胡绍皆), “Buddhist Education One Base with Tripod”, *Chinese Religious*, No.05, pp.16-17.

14. State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) oversees and manages the day-today affairs related to religion, including approving the opening of temples, churches, and mosques, approving special religious gatherings and activities, and approving the appointment of leaders of the religious associations.
15. Chinese: 以“学院丛林化,从林学院化,修学一体化,学生生活丛林化”为办学方针.
16. *Avatamsaka* perspective is based on the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. *Avatamsaka Sutra* describes a cosmos of infinite realms upon realms, mutually containing each other. The vision expressed in this work was the foundation for the creation of the Huayan School of Buddhism, which was characterized by a philosophy of interpenetration. Huayan taught that the totality of the *Dharmadhatu* arises in an interdependence that is wondrous and harmonious.
17. The Eight Chinese Buddhist Schools are the Yogacara, Madhyamika, Lotus, Avatamsaka, Vinaya, Pure Land, Chan, and Esoteric Schools.
18. BLCA Work Summaries and Reports, *Bodhi Vow* (Chinese:菩提愿), Unpublished BLCA Journal, No. 03, 2013, p. 30
19. Official website of Pushou Temple: Available: <http://www.pushousi.net/newsinfo.aspx?id=3886&t=pswy>.
20. *Bodhi Vow* Ibid., p. 30.
21. “Fulfilling the four kindnesses” or “fulfilling the four favors” means repaying the kindness received from parents and teachers, from all creatures, from the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), and from the nation. Repaying the kindness of the nation means to be patriotic; fulfilling the kindness of the Three Jewels is to show affection for the Buddhadharm.
22. Filial piety is considered the first virtue in Chinese culture. Ancient Chinese Confucianism formed a social moral system based on “filial piety as the first virtue”. Buddhism has influenced Confucian ethics. Buddhist practice filial piety and respect to the elderly as treat their parents. It sees filial piety as the foundation of ethics.
23. Charity Carrier of the BLCA, *Budhi Vow* (Chinese:菩提愿), Unpublished BLCA Journal, No. 02, 2011, p.4.
24. Interviewing Mrs. Gong in QAG on Sep. 21, 2013.
25. Sramaneri Longxian's only daughter is a senior bhiksuni who is living in Pushou Temple for several years, therefore Master Rurui allow she become sramaneri and living in QAG, that her daughter can calm to practice the dharma.
26. Interviewing Sramaneri Longxianin QAG on Sep. 21, 2013.
27. Interviewing Bhiksuni Bao, leader of volunteers, in QAG on Sep. 21, 2013.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen[®] journal and benefit from:

- Convenient online submission
- Rigorous peer review
- Immediate publication on acceptance
- Open access: articles freely available online
- High visibility within the field
- Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ► springeropen.com
