

RESOURCE ESSAY

**A Choice for a Chinese Woman:
Enlightenment in a Buddhist Convent@**

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Good instructional videos concerning Chinese religions are scarce. Among the few videos in that field is this 1993 production produced by a German television station and distributed by Films for the Humanities. In actuality, however, this video does little to illustrate Chinese Buddhism. In fact, despite its subtitle, there is little here pertaining to the Buddhist ideal of "enlightenment." Instead, what the filmmakers have given us is a muddled and deeply biased depiction of events in the life of one thirteen-year-old girl (at that age, hardly a "woman"). Rather than use those events to illustrate the nature of Chinese Buddhist monasticism, the filmmakers attempt to convince the viewer that the only reason such girls would ever enter a convent is that they are driven to do so by intolerable social oppression. The facts, however, do not seem to warrant such conclusions.

The video opens in the Sichuan (Szechwan) farming village where the subject is called only by her later religious name, Zhaoxing ("Radiant Joy"). She has grown up. The narrator asserts that her future there was destined to be marriage to "a coarse man, to whom she would be less than a piece of property, a servant." One wonders about the filmmakers' bases for such assertions. Are the men in this village truly "coarse"? If so, in what sense, and compared to whom? And in what sense can anything really be "*less than* a piece of property"? Do we meet *other* women in the village who are treated as "property"? Is the girl's *mother* "less than a piece of property"? What are the actual legal and social realities in China today? Can a husband or father really sell a woman as "property," or abuse her with impunity? In this village, do we see *evidence* of women being mistreated by men? Are we shown interviews with women who *complain* of such mistreatment, or complain that they are married to "coarse men"? Do we meet any of the *men* of the village, to see how "coarse" they might be? The answer to all of these questions is "no." The filmmakers seem not to care about the realities of this village: they simply *presume* that in China, women *must* be oppressed in these ways.

Before the film opens, Zhaoxing had been a schoolgirl. The filmmakers briefly interview other schoolgirls her age, who say that they have hopes of rewarding futures in the increasingly

prosperous Chinese economy. But given the filmmakers' claims about the oppressiveness of Chinese life, how could that be? Are these girls not, like Zhaoxing, predestined for an oppressive marriage? Apparently not: the interviewed girls show no sign of having experienced oppression in the village, and seem to feel that they have an acceptable degree of social and economic freedom. So if *these* girls have social and economic freedom, enhanced by the same public education that Zhaoxing enjoyed, why is she, unlike her classmates, somehow destined for a life as "less than property" in subjection to "a coarse man"?

After this odd depiction of the girl's native village, the narrator tells us that she travelled to Chengdu to visit her aunt. Why? We are not told. What was really going on in her life at that point? And what do these events have to do with her eventual decision to enter a convent. The filmmakers do not interview her or any of her family, classmates, teachers, or neighbors to find answers to such questions. While the filmmakers labor to raise concerns about the girl's life, they do little to provide useful *data* that would allow us to judge those concerns. Why not? Apparently because such data would not support the picture that the filmmakers are crafting, or their axiomatic assumptions about Chinese society.

The narrator now begins to explain the girl's decision to enter the convent. He claims that the decision shows *her* extraordinary independence of thinking.⁶ One wonders *how*? Is her act not a very *traditional* one in Chinese society, for boys and girls *alike*? Could one not interpret it as equivalent to running away to join a circus, i.e., as an act incited by a desire for a more exciting life? And in what way, precisely, does *her* act show more "independence of thinking" than the decision of her village *classmates* to pursue their education and perhaps achieve social, economic, or political eminence in a rapidly changing China?

Why, in fact, did this particular girl make this particular decision? The viewer never really finds out, at least not in terms that make any sense in terms of her actual life. Instead, the filmmakers impose upon her life a ready-made explanation of their own. The narrator intones that as the girl enters the convent, she is now an *escapee* from the village.⁶ He waxes inscrutably

melodramatic: "Escape! There is no escape, except to the convent." But where, one wonders, does this idea of "escape" *come from*? Is it from the girl herself? And again, why do *none* of the *other* girls in her village seem to feel *any need* for such "escape"?

Continuing the imposition of dramatized "meaning," the narrator expounds that it is this girl's "strength of conviction" brought her to the convent. One wonders, what "conviction"? Had she been religious in her native village? Not that we have been shown. Secondly, why should we think that her act shows "strength of conviction" at all? What are the real range of reasons that lead young Chinese, male or female, to enter monasteries? Do the filmmakers provide any comparative context, either from Western societies or from other Asian societies? Do youths in Taiwan, or Thailand, enter monasteries for the reasons that supposedly afflict this girl? The filmmakers show no evidence that they really care about Buddhist monasticism, about monasticism as a general phenomenon, or about the specific social and religious realities of China, past or present.¹

Next, we are told that in the convent the girl attained peace and contentment, and that she "could have had no idea this would happen." How, one wonders, do the filmmakers know that? At this point, they seem to be not so much documenting Chinese religion today, but rather weaving a fairy tale. They do not document that the girl really had such thoughts or feelings: to all appearances, they are simply making such things up.

At the temple, we meet an old nun. We are told that when young, she got good grades, so men disdained her, "no doubt part of the reason why she decided to become a nun." Even if that conjecture be valid, one must wonder why she and Zhaoxing are so different! Zhaoxing, after all, had entered the convent *not* because men had disdained her, but rather because of her "strength of conviction." Had this old nun never had any such "strength"? Here we see that the filmmakers' thesis is muddled. Which do they really want the audience to believe: that a girl is to be admired or pitied for becoming a nun? In either case, does their thesis really have anything to do with China, or with Buddhism, or with the real lives of these nuns?

The muddled presentation continues. In the girl's room, we are told that "Radiant Joy" does not want photos depicting her pre-Buddhist life to be filmed. Why not? We are not told. Then we are told that her father is not allowed into her room. Her *father*? Where did *he* come from? Hitherto, he has not even been *mentioned* anywhere in the film. Who *is* he? What is he *like*? Is he "a coarse man?" And more importantly: *What* is he doing *at the convent*? Has he come to drag her back to a life of oppression? No, apparently not. So why is he visiting her at her convent? Could it be that he is actually a good and caring man, who respects his daughter's religious pursuits, and has come to show his love and support for her? Could it be that her home life had actually *not* driven her to the convent?

Teachers of Asian religions will perk up at the next scene. Writing with a brush, the girl writes Chinese characters, and the narrator translates:

ⒶWhen you achieve enlightenment, you will always be successful.Ⓜ

Unfortunately, he is lying. The Chinese writing actually reads: ⒶWith lucky stars shining on high, all your affairs will be as you like.Ⓜ There is no mention here of "achieving enlightenment": the words involve *astrology*. Note, in fact, that nowhere in this video is the concept of "enlightenment" ever explained. In fact, *nowhere in the film are Buddhist ideas or practices meaningfully explained at all*. There is only one pertinent line in the whole film: ⒶBuddha (*sic*) is honored not as a god," the narrator says," but as a teacher.Ⓜ Teachers of Asian religions will wonder *which* Buddha he means! Is this convent a Theravada establishment? In *China*? One imagines not. So one wonders what form of Buddhism it represents Ⓒ a form in which one can "achieve enlightenment" (clearly a Mah"y"na concept), even though the concept of "Buddha" is explained in terms of Theravada Buddhism, which is alien to China. Clearly, the filmmakers have no comprehension of Buddhism, and no intention of producing a film that really explains it. True, the narrator says that "the center of the nuns= lives is meditation." But what is the real nature or purpose of Buddhist meditation? What is its relationship to "enlightenment"? Does one have to live in a monastery to meditate? And has there ever been a Chinese nun who seriously pursued

Buddhist enlightenment ^c who entered a convent to work toward that goal? If so, *why couldn't "Radiant Joy" simply be another such case?* Here is the crucial question: If young women like "Radiant Joy" *ever* enter convents because of sincere *religious* motivations, why must we understand her own entry into the convent as a sociologically defined "escape" from real or perceived oppression?

At long last, we see an interview with "Radiant Joy" and other young nuns. But rather than ask about Buddhism, or about her reasons for entering the convent, the questioner asks her: "What do you think of the 'happy couples' you see in the city?" The girl reportedly replies: ^aTheir love is filled with contradictions.[@] So the questioner, in "gotcha" mode, retorts: "So what about the nun who left to marry?" At this point, "Radiant Joy" becomes angry and embarrassed, and tries to leave the room. The narrator asserts: ^aClearly the subject of marriage, or a future without husband, marriage, children, is something with which she has not totally come to terms.[@] One wonders why such matters constitute a vital issue here. Is it really proper to act as though this girl's decision to enter a Buddhist convent must be explained in such terms? The filmmakers have clearly decided so, and are willing to ignore many legitimate questions ^c and to omit or distort pertinent facts ^c to convince the viewer that these are the real issues.

Unfortunately for the filmmakers' argument, they seem unable to produce data that supports their position. If "the subject of marriage...is something with which" the girl "has not totally come to terms," one wonders how many *thirteen-year-olds*, in rural China or elsewhere, have done so? Is this girl's ambivalence about eventual marriage really so odd for a girl of her age? Why, one wonders, were the *other* girls in her native village not also "forced" to seek "escape" to a convent? Was there really some social oppression that propelled this girl, *and none of her classmates*, to seek such a desperate "escape"? If she did feel threatened by the prospect of eventual marriage to "a coarse man" in her village, why did she not just decide to get a job in the city, like her classmates?

The viewer might also wonder whether the girl's religious calling is permanent. When a

girl becomes a Christian nun, she always has the option to leave the convent. So in China, do Buddhist nuns ever leave the convent? Yes: the interviewer cited a nun who had left to get married. But clearly, *that Chinese woman was not forced* into marriage: she had had the *option* to *remain* in the convent. So the evidence demonstrates that Chinese women *do not* always find marriage an oppressive prospect, a horror that transforms them, helplessly, into "less than a piece of property."

In addition, one has to ask about the "choice" of Chinese *boys* who enter monasteries. Do they, also, enter monastic life because they have "not totally come to terms" with "the subject of marriage"? The filmmakers never show us any boys becoming monks, much less ask pertinent questions about such boys' motivations. *Why not? Is there anything about these nuns' lives that is demonstrably gender-specific?* The filmmakers, alas, are not interested in determining the realities involved. They are not really concerned with the social, economic, or political realities of her native village or the surrounding society, or with the reasons why *other* girls did not attempt a comparable "escape." They are not interested in any *facts* about Chinese society today, such as marriage laws, or whether increased education, economic development, or social change have provided new opportunities for young men and women from rural areas.

At the end, the narrator observes that the nuns in the convent are quite happy, and comments: "We expected this story to be tragic." *Why*, one asks? The answer is clearly that the filmmakers went to Sichuan to find a story that could showcase what they *presumed* about oppression of women in China. When the facts did not mesh with their predetermined scenario, the filmmakers simply ignored them, and produced the story that they wanted to produce, regardless of its accuracy. So rather than an enlightening case-study of religion in China today, this video is a heavy-handed example of cultural imperialism. What is objectionable is not that the filmmakers have a point of view: what is objectionable is that they have distorted the data in a confused attempt to force it to support their ideological assumptions. One would hope that a more conscientious group of filmmakers could re-examine this topic with greater intellectual

honesty, and allow us to see the real facts, and their true implications for our understanding of Chinese religion and society.

1. For comparison, see the detailed analysis in my article, "Huang Ling-wei: A Taoist Priestess in T'ang China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 19 (1991), 47-73, and the more general observations in my entry on Taoism in *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), II: 959-64.