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Longlian's Buddhist Performative Phenomenology: Karma, Embodied Knowledge, and Skilful Rehabitualization

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the work of Ven. Longlian (1909–2006) to explore how women engage and *can* engage with Buddhist philosophy. Posthumously acclaimed as the most understanding Buddhist nun in modern China, Longlian is known as a significant reviver of monastic disciplines and Buddhist education. Building on existing research in social history and cultural anthropology, I present Longlian as an erudite philosopher. Taking lived experience seriously, I argue for reading her work as a Buddhist expression of performative phenomenology, which enriches the Euro-American articulation of this theory with her conceptions of karma, embodied knowledge, and skilfulness. Engaging with Buddhism through performative phenomenology, Longlian has lived out a life that showcases a possibility of closing the rift between the “new women” and the “traditional women” in Chinese modernity, which further expresses a more process-oriented feminism.

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1. Introduction: How Do and Can Chinese Women Engage with Buddhist Philosophy?

How do women engage with Buddhist philosophy? This is the question posed by Jin Y. Park at the beginning of her monograph on the Korean Zen master, Kim Iryōp (1896–1971).¹ Reading through Kim Iryōp's writing, Park observes that women are attracted to Buddhism, partly because of the Buddhist critique of essentialism, including gender essentialism, in its main tenet of emptiness and no-self; partly also because of the way of practicing Buddhism that affords women a chance to live outside the domestic sphere.² More importantly, Buddhist thought opens up a discursive space for people, especially women, to navigate life.³ For Kim Iryōp, philosophizing is more about concretely navigating “the narrative discourse of

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¹ Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*, 1. The original formulation of Park's question is as follows: “How and why do women engage with Buddhism?”

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*

our daily experiences”.⁴ That is why Park proposes the notion of “narrative philosophy” to draw scholarly attention to the importance of the lived experiences of Buddhist women in constructing theories about them.⁵

Inspired by Park’s scholarship, I want to raise the same question in my analysis of Ven. Longlian (1909–2006), another eminent “Buddhist nun” (Bhikṣuṇī in Sanskrit) in East Asian modernity.⁶ Longlian has been acclaimed posthumously as the “most outstanding Bhikṣuṇī in modern China”.⁷ She was born in the city of Leshan in Southwestern China’s Sichuan province.⁸ Educated in both traditional and modern formats, she succeeded in the civil servant exam and started to work for the Sichuan government in 1937. Although her initiation into Buddhism came at an early age under the influence of female members of her family, she began a systematic study of Buddhist thought by attending the lectures of leading Buddhist scholastics at that time, such as Wang Enyang (1897–1964), Fazun (1902–1980), and Nenghai (1886–1967). Gradually, she became proficient in both Indo-Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist thought, which shaped her inclusive style of writing and teaching philosophy. In 1941, she resigned from the provincial government to be ordained as a Buddhist nun. Since then, Longlian joined the Buddhist effort to revive her tradition in China and restore the socially engaged ethos of Buddhism. For scholars in social history and cultural anthropology, Longlian is a significant reformer who, in the early 1980s, took a lead in reestablishing dual-ordination for mainland Chinese Buddhist women and founding the Sichuan Academy of Buddhist Nuns.⁹ Building on their research, I have argued elsewhere that Longlian should also be acknowledged as an erudite philosopher.¹⁰ In this article, I bring together several nascent threads in my previous work to explore how (and why) Chinese women like Longlian engage with Buddhism. This task is much needed not just due to Longlian’s impact on the revitalization of Buddhist scholasticism. More importantly, it is also because of the ways in which she skilfully lived out a life to redefine the identity of a Buddhist nun and reorganize a monastic community as the lived space for Buddhist women in Chinese modernity. Drawing from Longlian’s work, I proffer to expand narrative philosophy into what I refer to as performative phenomenology.

As Park has urged, if scholars take lived experience seriously, philosophy should be reconceptualized so that our parochial definition of philosophy as abstract theorization can be broadened.¹¹ This reconceptualization, as I intend to argue in this article, needs to be coupled with another imperative of debunking the divide between textual studies and ritual practices. This is particularly the case because many Buddhist women, unlike Longlian and Kim Iryōp, are not fully literate or highly educated. Yet, they also become experts of Buddhism, just like Longlian and Kim Iryōp, through embodying a practical knowledge, further becoming what Xiaofei Kang calls “ritual masters of ‘doing’”.¹²

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ To reduce linguistic barriers for readers of this journal, I only add Sanskrit terms for crucial notions.

⁷ Bianchi, “Subtle Erudition”, 273.

⁸ For more information about her life and work, see Qiu, *Dangdai Diyi Biqiuni*; Chen, “Longlian Fashi Nianpu Chubian”; Bianchi, “Subtle Erudition”.

⁹ Ester Bianchi has championed this study. See Bianchi, *The Iron Statue*; *idem*, “Yi jie wei shi”; *idem*, “Reading Equality”.

¹⁰ Li, “Meta-Ethical Pluralism”.

¹¹ Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*, 6.

¹² Kang, “Rural Women”, 47.

In her recent ethnographical research of senior rural women in Songpan, a town currently in Longlian's home province of Sichuan, Kang traces how these seniors inhabit the ritual norms of worship, prayers, offerings, and so on, to build their community as a lived space of solidarity.¹³ What characterizes "the religious world of these women" is labour, such as performing rituals and preparing temple food, rather than textual studies.¹⁴ The interventions from social history and cultural anthropology must be recognized and ruminated by philosophers. If women engage with Buddhist philosophy through an embodied knowledge of their lived experiences, the practical nature of narrative philosophy needs to be further systematized.

Performative phenomenology is my proposal for such systematization. It serves as an approach that is both embedded in the lived experience of Buddhist women and informed by Buddhist and Euro-American philosophies. In connecting phenomenology with performativity theory, I follow the writings of Longlian to turn to the Buddhist notions of karma, embodied knowledge, and skilfulness to bring the approach of performative phenomenology into fruition. For Buddhist thinkers like Longlian, karma is a main hermeneutic device that describes various types of causally efficacious performances in lived experiences, such as mental activities, verbal actions, and bodily behaviours. The efficacy of karma characterizes a conditional power of performances – performance that is not a theatrical act or a blind repetition but a practical orientation towards the surroundings – through which individual phenomena arise together with their environment. A person also emerges from the formative processes of these efficacious performances, which suggests the interdependence of all phenomena in lived experience and makes the personal identity empty of an essential core. The Buddhist outlook further dragonises that these formative processes of identity are cohered into a shared social web that sustains a habitual propensity to misperceive phenomena, such as personhood, in an essentialist manner. That is why the concept of karma makes the Buddhist notion of emptiness both descriptive and critically transformative: emptiness describes how phenomena are empty of an essential core to criticize the shared habitual propensity of essentialism for transforming such propensity. Prescriptively, people shall go through an overall rehabitualization to embody the insight of emptiness as the know-know, or in Buddhist terms, as the skilfulness of their practice. In this collective process of cultivating the embodied knowledge, various types of regulatory norms are inhabited and renewed to remake identity and reorganize community. As such, performative phenomenology is a study of lived experience that does not presume a fixed subject as the condition for the possibility of phenomena but perceives the subject as formed and transformed through efficacious performances together with their environment. Embedding performance in the formative and transformative processes of identity and sociality, this approach aims to bridge the thinking-doing divide.

Engaging with Buddhism through performative phenomenology, Longlian lived out a life to cultivate the embodied knowledge of emptiness, further remaking her identity into a nun and reorganizing the temple-space as a lived space for a monastic family of shared aspirations across public and private domains. The cultivating process of the know-how enabled her to carve out a path for women in Chinese modernity, a path that showcases

¹³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴ Kang, "Who are They", 77.

the possibility of closing the modernist rift between “traditional women” and “new women”. She presents to us not just how Chinese women have engaged with Buddhist philosophy but also how they *can* do it. Her way of living, thus, expresses a more process-oriented type of feminism that prioritizes the process for cultivating practical knowledge and indispensable skilfulness to make any emancipatory goals possible.

In what follows, I first make a case for performative phenomenology, despite possible tension between phenomenology and poststructuralism in their stances towards subjectivity (section 2). Thereafter, I turn to Longlian to explore how her work can be interpreted as a Buddhist expression of performative phenomenology (sections 3 and 4), which enriches the Euro-American articulation of this theory with the Buddhist notions of “karma” (*ye*業), “embodied knowledge” (*bore*般若, *prajñā* in Sanskrit), and “skilfulness” (*fangbianshanqiao*方便善巧, *upāya* in Sanskrit). Taking performative phenomenology as the approach, I outline how (and why) Longlian skilfully navigated the changing dynamics, especially gendered dynamics, in Chinese modernity. Through reviving monastic education and disciplines, she, together with generations of Buddhist nuns, renewed the practice of remaking the identity of a Buddhist nun and reorganizing the monastic community, which expresses a more process-oriented feminism (section 5). To end the discussion, I sketch how Longlian’s work continues to inspire contemporary Chinese Buddhist nuns. It is through their skilfulness that living a life as a Buddhist nun becomes a new normal in modern, humanistic Buddhism.

2. A Case for Performative Phenomenology

In Euro-American philosophy, performative phenomenology brings phenomenology and poststructuralism together, redefining performativity in terms of a lived body and reimagining that lived body as normatively performative. *Prima facie*, performative phenomenology is quite plausible. Nevertheless, there might be a tension in their stances towards subjectivity.¹⁵ Phenomenology is a study of lived experience from the first-person perspective, which makes subjectivity the pivot. Indeed, as Gilles Deleuze remarks, the norm of natural perception in phenomenology presupposes a subject that is anchored in the world.¹⁶ In contrast, accounts of performativity in poststructuralism typically reject the logical and ontological primacy of a subject. If subjectivity is always presupposed in phenomenology but problematized by performativity, how can we make a case for performative phenomenology?

In answering this question, I find it crucial to start with their shared critique of Cartesian dualism to locate a point of convergence. Let us first turn to phenomenology to trace how subjectivity becomes increasingly decentred. In his later work, Edmund Husserl wrestles with the paradox of subjectivity in transcendental philosophy, where subjectivity serves as the condition for the possibility of phenomena in experience.¹⁷ Subjectivity becomes paradoxical because a subject is both “in the world as an object” and

¹⁵ Lucilla Guidi, one editor of the volume *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, also recognizes that subjectivity can be read either strongly as a “detached spectator” or softly as embedded in experience (Guidi, “Introduction”, 3-5). Yet, subjectivity is always presupposed, as argued by Maren Wehrle in this volume (Wehrle, “Bodily Performativity”, 122). Hence, this volume does not fully address the issue of subjectivity when bringing phenomenology and poststructuralism together to justify the possibility of performative phenomenology.

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 57.

¹⁷ Hua 6, 182. I cite Husserl’s work in the *Husserliana* as Hua. The English translation is my own.

“for the world a subject of consciousness”.¹⁸ To resolve this paradox, Husserl experiments with genetic phenomenology, which not only describes the intentional structure of consciousness to show how every mental act is about something but also enquires into the genesis of such intentionality.¹⁹ Gradually, Husserl unveils that every active mental act initiated by the subject towards an object always points back to and, therefore, presumes a passive constitution, whereby the subject and its surroundings mutually constitute each other.²⁰ Far from a disembodied ego in Cartesian dualism, the transcendental subject always reaches out to other subjects to constitute a shared lifeworld. Given how subjectivity and objectivity become correlated, I have argued for reading Husserl’s transcendental idealism as a version of correlative non-dualism.²¹

Inspired by Husserl’s later thought,²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that if philosophers are truly committed to “a phenomenology of genesis”, they need to demarcate intentionality as the directedness of a mental act from operative intentionality of the lived body.²³ The body, just like the subject, becomes paradoxical in the wake of Cartesian dualism. When the ego becomes disembodied and the world becomes disenchanting into mechanism—as Charles Taylor scrutinizes in his examination of René Descartes²⁴—the body is also demoted to an object in the world and displayed as an idea in consciousness.²⁵ To resolve this paradox, Merleau-Ponty recentres the conception of a body.

For Merleau-Ponty, a body cannot be reduced to a mechanic unity of corporeal materiality.²⁶ Nor is it merely a representational unity of psychological factuality.²⁷ Bridging the gap between physiology and psychology, Merleau-Ponty foregrounds how our very body is lived. In experience, this lived body acts meaningfully in and towards the world to arrange concurrently itself and its environment.²⁸ To be able to move towards a thing *is* to understand it and integrate it into the embodied world.²⁹ Such moving-towards or aiming-at entails the operative intentionality of the lived body.³⁰ Enriching the concept of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty redirects our focus from the “*I think*” of the Cartesian mind to the “*I can*” of the lived body.³¹ By virtue of its intentional movement, the lived body remains anonymous and pre-reflective, or in Shaun

¹⁸ Ibid., 184.

¹⁹ Hua 14, 40.

²⁰ Hua 1, 112.

²¹ Li, *Comparing Husserl’s*, 113–17. Husserl’s later work on genetic and generative phenomenology also portrays subjectivity in a multi-level way. In my other writings where I reread premodern Yogācāra Buddhist text to rewrite Buddhist feminism, I have explored a way of connecting Husserlian phenomenology with Yogācāra Buddhism. Preliminary findings on interpersonal relationship, transformative sociality, a Buddhist critical phenomenology of emotion, have been published. See, Li, “Eroding Sexism”; *idem*, “Joy as Contextualized Feeling”; *idem*, “What is Shared”. Nevertheless, Longlian’s view of subjectivity is complicated in her effort to bring Yogācāra and Madhyamaka Buddhism together, which makes her closer to the position of Merleau-Ponty and Butler. I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to bring this point to light.

²² For the continuities between later Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, see Zahavi, “Merleau-Ponty on Husserl”.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxxii/18–19. I pair the pagination in Don A. Landes’s English translation with the original one in French. As McWeeny insightfully notes, the notion of operative intentionality becomes crucial in the phenomenological study of body politics, including Butler’s discussion of gender performativity. See, McWeeny, “Operative Intentionality”, 257.

²⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 146.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 74/100.

²⁶ Ibid., 78/104.

²⁷ Ibid., 97/124.

²⁸ Ibid., 139/172.

²⁹ Ibid., 140/173.

³⁰ Ibid., 140/174.

³¹ Ibid., 139/172.

Gallagher's terms, "absently available"; its active organizing performance amounts to the body schema.³² In doing so, the lived body opens up a horizon as an intentional arc to coalesce our life trajectory temporally, spatially, morally, and politically, further securing our meaningful situatedness within the world.³³ A meaningful movement can be acquired, trained, and even cultivated. Although a lived body comes as a primordial habit of navigating life, it can rehabilitate itself.³⁴ As Merleau-Ponty elaborates, a habit is "neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex" but "expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments".³⁵ When a new habit is formed, it brings embodied knowledge that can transform the lived body together with its surroundings.³⁶ In this sense, our very existence is never passively predetermined as "an ancient custom", but can experience freedom through the renewal of our habitual body.³⁷

It is through the lived body that the subject becomes anchored, can arise upon reflection, and can also be reconstituted through a new habit.³⁸ Reformulating subjectivity in terms of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty discloses how the subject and the world are embodied. As Frank Chouraqui succinctly puts it, "the transcendental idealist view of the precedence of the subject is finally overcome", when the lived body becomes the organizing principle of our experience.³⁹

Merleau-Ponty's view of the lived body remains a source of inspiration for Judith Butler's investigation of gender/sex. In an early article, Butler discerns how Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty champion "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts".⁴⁰ Reframing the lived body as "an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities", Butler suggests that embodiment issues a new grammar for styling existence devoid of a pre-given subject.⁴¹ Such a grammar highlights how a body "becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time".⁴² Taking phenomenology as a starting point, Butler turns to Michel Foucault to position the personal formation of gender in the larger socio-political structure as the context for such repetitive performance.⁴³ Butler's reservation with the "individualist assumptions underlying the more restricted view of constituting acts within phenomenological discourse" might explain why this philosopher embraces speech act theory for the politics of gender performativity.⁴⁴

In elaborating on the notion of performativity, Butler problematizes both voluntarism, which elevates the subject as the constructor of self-identity, and cultural determinism, which upholds an existent structure to dictate the constructing process.⁴⁵ A performance

³² Gallagher, "Lived Body and Environment", 156.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137/170.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145/179.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 148/182.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114/142.

³⁹ Chouraqui, *The Body and Embodiment*, 94.

⁴⁰ Butler, "Performative Acts", 519.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 523.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 525.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xv–xvii.

is not a theatrical move but a repetitive act that instantiates regulatory norms to form a subject.⁴⁶ Specifically in Butler's analysis of gender/sex, a crucial set of these norms is about heterosexuality.⁴⁷ Sex, thus, is not to be neutralized as a given entity for a social constructivist explanation of gender.⁴⁸ Rather, the very category of sex points to how sex is constituted through repetitive performances of regulatory norms.⁴⁹ It is in this performative process that a subject is formed, which contrasts with the pre-given primacy of subjectivity in voluntarism.⁵⁰ Moreover, such a performative process is not "singular and deterministic".⁵¹ To capture the distinctive sense of constituting through performativity, Butler replaces the language of construction with that of materialization. In Butler's terms, materialization is a sedimentary process "that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter".⁵² Nevertheless, for Butler, these performances are primarily speech acts as discursive practices that not only reiterate and recite regulatory norms but also consolidate existing power structures.⁵³ That is why Butler echoes Foucault to underscore the "paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*)", considering how a subject is performatively formed within the norms and always aims to resist and subvert these norms.⁵⁴

Butler's theory of performativity exerts a crucial influence on feminist anthropology, due to its critique of both voluntarism and cultural determinism. Indeed, the discourse of liberal feminism portrays women from non-Western cultures as either free subjects who can choose their identity or as passive victims subsumed under existent cultural norms.⁵⁵ In this liberal feminist portrayal, agency is only possible through the resistance of existent norms, as a resistance of "dominating and subjectivating modes of power".⁵⁶ Such a construal of subjectivity and agency has been called into question by Saba Mahmood.

In her anthropological study of women in Egypt's piety movement, Mahmood draws upon Butler's view that a subject is formed through normative performances.⁵⁷ This anthropologist continues to foreground the role of embodiment.⁵⁸ For women in the piety movement, their bodily work and labour constitute their individual subjectivity, as a cultivational practice in their ethical pursuit of freedom.⁵⁹ Departing from the dualistic framework where norms are either consolidated or subverted in the process of subject formation, Mahmood proffers that "norms... are performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways".⁶⁰ The subject formation process for women in the piety movement is the process of cultivating a virtuous self, through which their agency matures in the performance of inhabiting norms of piety.⁶¹

⁴⁶ Ibid., xxi.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xx.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁴⁹ Ibid., xxii.

⁵⁰ Ibid., xviii.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., xxi.

⁵⁴ Ibid., xxiii.

⁵⁵ See Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad".

⁵⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17. It should be noted that Mahmood skilfully reads Butler to bring back bodily performance.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁶¹ Ibid., 163.

Developing Mahmood's insight on inhabiting norms, Muhammad Velji argues that when norms are inhabited, they cannot remain unchanged.⁶² Turning to the women in the piety movement, Velji zooms in on their creative engagement in the ethical practice of their community, further identifying creativity, not resistance, as the hallmark of agency.⁶³ To illustrate the role of creativity, Velji evokes Mahmood's "example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability".⁶⁴ Velji highlights how, in this process, the norms of playing piano are not just inhabited but also slowly changed and creatively redefined by the final product of repetitive performance *qua* the newly made virtuoso pianist.⁶⁵ Such creativity alludes to the rehabilitation of the lived body in the subject (trans-)formation process. A more robust examination of (re-)habitation is provided by Maren Wehrle. Outlining three levels in the habitual formation of identity, Wehrle tracks how repetitive bodily performance first passively generates an "enduring style of experience", then constitutes a "bodily form of habituality" to enable operative intentionality, and finally brings to fruition an active "personal habituality" in a reflective subject.⁶⁶ It is specifically due to the second level of operative intentionality that the lived body can rehabilitate itself to make performativity a "preserving and transformative force".⁶⁷ As such, the performance of inhabiting norms can (re-)make a subject and change norms.⁶⁸

Once the possibility of rehabilitation for changing norms in the embodied performance of forming and transforming a subject is countenanced, subjectivation is no longer paradoxical. More importantly for our purpose, upon dissolving the paradoxes of subjectivity, body, and subjectivation in the wake of Cartesian dualism, performative phenomenology can be substantiated. It is a study of lived experience that does not presume a transcendental subject as the condition for the possibility of phenomena but, rather, perceives the subject as formed through and arising from the normative performance of a lived body. By virtue of its operative intentionality, the lived body performs to navigate life, further arranging itself together with its surroundings. In this sense, subject-making and world-making are two sides of the same process. Although a lived body is habitually embedded in the matrix of power relations, it can rehabilitate itself to reconstitute the subject and the world through cultivating new skills. I speak of this transformative feature as the reorientation of the subject *with* the world. In this process, norms are inhabited but also renewed – with renewing not as automatically repeating but as adding fresh new life – further alluding to the freedom experienced and enabled by the lived body.

Although the term "performative phenomenology" has yet to become common vocabulary in the philosophical lexicon, it has already been deployed in Buddhist philosophy,

⁶² Velji, "From Opposition to Creativity", 785.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 783.

⁶⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.

⁶⁵ Velji, *The Philosophy of Piety*, 127.

⁶⁶ Wehrle, "Bodies (that) Matter", 376–77.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that both Velji and Wehrle turn to Merleau-Ponty's account of institution to rethink the socialization process of a person in terms of creative habituation (see Velji, *The Philosophy of Piety*, 145–216; Wehrle, "Bodies (that) Matter", 381). Due to limited space, I must refrain from unpacking the parallels between institution and collective karma.

critical and political phenomenology, social history, and cultural anthropology.⁶⁹ Bringing the approach of performative phenomenology to the fore, I will now investigate how Longlian has proposed a Buddhist version of performative phenomenology in her accounts of karma, embodied knowledge, and skilfulness, which systematically enriches the Euro-American articulation of this approach. To be more specific, her articulation of karma details the intergenerational conditioning of the lived bodies of sentient beings together with their shared world, thereby expanding the phenomenological notion of operative intentionality from personal experience to collective saṃsāric history. Her elaboration on two types of embodied knowledge of emptiness systematizes the Euro-American notion of (re-)habituation into the Buddhist conception of karmic (re-)habitualization. Accordingly, agency becomes reimagined in terms of skilfulness in renewing norms,⁷⁰ a renewal that is never a repetition but adds fresh new life to regulatory norms. As to be seen shortly, skilful performances enable Longlian to bridge various types of dichotomies inherent to the changing dynamics of the modern transition of China. María Logunes has insightfully pinpointed how these dichotomies are exemplary of a set of “fractured locus” that “constitutes the subjectivation of the colonized”.⁷¹ The skilful performance, as enacted by Longlian and envisioned in the Buddhist tradition, prepares people, especially women, to explore what Logunes proposes as the “creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating” in response to the logic of coloniality.⁷² As I have argued elsewhere,⁷³ such skilfulness affords Buddhist women with a practical flexibility and resilience in navigating the gendered power dynamics of a society, a flexibility that has been spoken of by Logunes as “playfulness”.⁷⁴ Enacting this performative

⁶⁹ Performative phenomenology features significantly in the burgeoning field of political and critical phenomenology, which addresses Butler’s concern that phenomenology needs to examine structural issues. See, for instance, Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Salamon, *The Life and Death of Latisha King*. Traces of performative phenomenology can also be found in the social historical and cultural anthropological enquiry of agency, intersubjectivity, and lived space. See, for example, Willock, *Lineages of the Literary*; Starling, *Guardians of the Buddha’s Home*. In the study of Buddhist texts, scholars championed by Hsiao-Lan Hu have applied Butler’s performativity theory to the interpretation of karma, body, and no-self. See, Hu, *This Worldly-Nibbana*; *idem*, “Karma, No-Self, and Social Construction”; Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*; Scherer, “Queering Buddhist Traditions”. More specifically, Hu has insightfully discerned the connection between the Buddhist rejection of a fixed, unchanging self and Butler’s critique of a transcendental ego in their articulation of a Buddhist-Feminist social ethics. Hu also acknowledges the bodily aspect of karma, which they refer to as volitional action. Nevertheless, the phenomenological feature of karma remains nascent in Hu’s analysis. For Hu, it is Butler’s notion of “sedimentation” that informs the interpretation of karma. See Hu, *This Worldly-Nibbana*, 91–125. Inspired by Hu’s work, I aim to further the discussion in two ways. First, I share the aspiration of Mahmood, Velji, and Wehrle that the articulation of performance cannot be confined to speech act but needs to be expanded to bodily actions in lived experience. Second, I find it necessary to turn to the concept of performance itself, not the sedimentation of these performances, to reinterpret karma. In doing so, I can connect karma with the concepts of emptiness and skilfulness to outline a more process-oriented feminism. If I understand Longlian correctly, she might find Butler’s notion of sedimentation closer to the Buddhist concept of karmic efficacy, rather than karma as such.

⁷⁰ If I understand Velji correctly, when he uses creativity to define agency, he follows Henri Bergson to consider creativity as inherent in the process of evolution. In contrast, the Buddhist view of skilfulness does not inherently exist as a fact but always needs cultivation, since the rise of skilfulness is integral to the overall process of rehabitualization. Since our different understanding of agency is not the main topic of this article, I will elaborate on it elsewhere.

⁷¹ Logunes, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, 749.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 754.

⁷³ Li, “What is Shared”.

⁷⁴ Logunes, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 95. I want to express my gratitude to one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to engage with Logunes’s work, especially given that I am very inspired by Logunes’s manifesto for a decolonial feminism in a multicultural society. Due to the limited space, I cannot unpack the parallels between Logunes’s view of multiple worlds and Longlian’s notion of collective karma. Nevertheless, both are crucial for revalorizing the importance of space-making in living a feminist life, as readers will see in section 5. I hope to be able to elaborate on these parallels in my future work.

phenomenology, Longlian does not eschew the historical past but integrates it as an organic part of her Buddhist modernism. The upcoming sections will expound on these aspects of her Buddhist performative phenomenology to outline a more process-oriented feminism.

3. Longlian's Buddhist Performative Phenomenology (I): Karma

Buddhism shares the refutation of a pre-given and presupposed subject in its doctrine of emptiness and no-self, which aims to reveal the truth of how things really are. For Longlian, this truth is encapsulated in the formula of “dependent-arising *qua* emptiness” (*yuanqixingkong* 緣起性空):

Tibetan Buddhism teaches emptiness in a rather straightforward manner; that is, dependent-arising *qua* emptiness ... All things arise out of causes and conditions. Since the arising of a phenomenon is dependent on conditionality, this phenomenon does not have self-determined intrinsic existence but is brought about by causes and conditions ... Let us first clarify emptiness, which is tantamount to no-self. To be clear, if emptiness is construed as non-existence, this interpretation is too simplistic and facile. Emptiness is the negation of that which is to be attached and, thus, emptiness is to empty your attachment. Then, where does attachment come from? For any phenomenon, if you obstinately approach it as an intrinsically real object—for instance, you perceive your children to be intrinsically real or you treat your money to be ultimately existent—your obstinate attitude gives rise to attachment to make you ignorant about dependent-arising. Money also dependently arises out of causes and conditions such as your previous karmic merit or your labour. All is dependent-arising. And dependent-arising has the wholesome side and the unwholesome side. For instance, if money is used for unwholesome events, it becomes a poison; if money is spent on wholesome causes, it turns into the remedy. To perceive things through dependent-arising is also to see how they are interconnected with two aspects. The attitude of perceiving things as intrinsic and self-determined is called ignorance ... There is a story about a host who invited several guests home to eat steamed buns made by one thousand people. Yet, when the guests arrived, the host just served them a regular tray of buns and specified that these buns were indeed made by a thousand people. The host said that the making of buns needed wheat flour. And where did wheat flour come from? From the house of farmers. To produce wheat flour, farmers needed workers, water, instruments, and fertilizers. Just take the instrument of a hoe for example. Its material of iron came from the mine and had to be transported by the trains. And where did trains come from? One item after another, these buns probably could not even be made by just one thousand people. The gist of this story is that a small phenomenon is produced by a multiplicity of causes and conditions, which is the insight of Huayan Buddhism. The philosophy of Huayan holds that every small particle contains ten thousand things. Hence, every phenomenon is extraordinary to encompass countless causes and conditions ... The Buddhist teaching demands that you realize “how things actually are” (*zhufashixiang* 諸法實相). To do so, you need to start with the analysis of one phenomenon and comprehend how it is dependently arising without an intrinsic nature. Even though it is not intrinsically real, it has come into being in this very moment. This mug, if you take it to drink tea, then it has its efficacy and functionality. Without this mug, you have nothing to hold the tea. A dependently arising phenomenon is not intrinsically real but remains efficacious. The understanding of dependently arising phenomena will remove such attachment to intrinsic nature.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Longlian, “*Baifa Mingmen Lun Shi*”, 182–83. The translation of Chinese texts in this article is my own.

From this excerpt, it can be inferred that Longlian considers the Buddhist teaching of emptiness as a “dialectic” (*bianzhengfa* 辯證法) of existence and non-existence.⁷⁶ Since intrinsic nature defines the self-determined essence, it does not exist for phenomena that arise and perish out of causes and conditions. Applying the rejection of essence to a steamed bun, Longlian explicates how it is formed by more than a thousand people in socio-economic production. The formation of a bun mirrors an indefinite number of conditions, just like how a small particle emerges to reflect the entire cosmos. In the same vein, a sentient being like a human has no essential core *qua* the self but, rather, arises out of a multiplicity of causes and conditions throughout spatiotemporality.⁷⁷ That is why Sonam Kachru speaks of sentient beings as cosmological individuals who are “metaphysical collectives of several (psychologically and forensically) distinct persons, linked to one another by actions and the consequences of actions”.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the Buddhist rejection of essentialism does not yield nihilism, because these phenomena are conventionally real in each specific situation where they arise. The mug is not intrinsically real but, in the current event of drinking tea, it becomes conventionally real due to its functional efficacy of holding water. Such an affirmation of conditional existence dispels the spectre of nihilism to open the door to interconnectedness and interdependence. That is why Longlian follows previous Indo-Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist masters to accentuate that the ultimate truth of emptiness and the conventional truth of dependent-arising depict two different yet correlated aspects of the same process of the arising and perishing phenomena.⁷⁹

The repudiation of nihilism further brings to light *how* dependent-arising unfolds. In Longlian’s explication above, a mug becomes a mug when it is used for drinking and holding water. A steamed bun becomes a steamed bun when it is served to guests as food. Money becomes money due to its transactional functionality. The intentionality behind their functionality also lays the ground for ethics. Any monetary means is not inherently good or bad. Rather, money becomes cohered into an intentional context of experience to function transactionally for wholesome or unwholesome purposes. Hence, the identity of a phenomenon is efficaciously acquired through the intentionality of functional actions. It is an operative intentionality that characterizes karmic causality, beyond voluntarism and determinism, to establish dependent-arising as an orderly process. Far from being random and contingent, dependent-arising is regulated by karmic causality.

Etymologically, karma describes the actions that can elicit an effect. In Buddhism, karma groups mental activities, verbal actions, and bodily behaviours as the efficacious performance of orienting towards the surroundings. The power of karma is compared to that of a magnet in Fazun’s lecture on Candrakīrti’s (c. 600s) commentary of *Entering the Middle Way*, which has been transcribed by Longlian:

[Phenomena that arise out of] causes and conditions have no intrinsic nature, which makes karmic result illusory. Hence, there is no need to postulate a foundational entity for

⁷⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁷ Longlian does not elaborate on the distinction between sentience and non-sentience. For this topic, see Ziporyn, “How the Tree Sees Me”.

⁷⁸ Kachru, *Other Lives*, 107.

⁷⁹ Longlian, “*Xingjing Qianshi*”, 200.

establishing karma. Although a previous karmic action vanishes, it can induce an upcoming result. Figuratively, it is like the magnet that can attract iron from afar.⁸⁰

As elucidated here, karmic causality cannot be reduced to mechanical causality, the latter of which has been problematized by phenomenologists.⁸¹ This is because karmic causality never posits causes and results as a series of independently factual and temporally consecutive events. Rather, it carries a regulating power that conditions the lived bodies of sentient beings throughout their mental activities, verbal actions, and bodily behaviours, in parallel to the power of a magnet. Without demoting the lived body into corporeality, karma reaffirms the lived body as the lived experience of efficacious performance. As elaborated by Park and Gereon Kopf, “dependent co-arising is a theory of conditioned causality”.⁸² Karmic causality, thus, captures the conditionality that shapes the trajectory of a lived body to give rise to the life of a sentient being:

The power that moves the samsāric history of death and rebirth for sentient beings epitomizes their “habitual propensity” (*xiqi*習氣) for innate self-attachment (namely, the propensity to be obstinately attached to the self when there is no self). Buddhism refers to such “innate self-attachment” (*jushengwozhi*俱生我執) as the “root ignorance” (*genbenwuming*根本無明), which is inborn, not acquired. When an infant is born and starts crying, this action is the manifestation of self-attachment. Because of such self-attachment, craving arises in times that are agreeable, and aversion emerges in times that are disagreeable. Ignorance animates basic forms of “defilement” (*fannao*煩惱), like craving and aversion, which further produce indefinite numbers of other defilements. The intentionality underneath defilement moves the bodily behaviours and verbal actions of sentient beings. Such intentionality is “karma” (*ye*業), and these verbal and non-verbal actions are called the “karmic courses” (*yedao*業道) ... To end suffering, the root of saṃsāra must be eradicated, which is self-attachment. To remove self-attachment, the embodied knowledge of no-self must arise.⁸³

For Longlian, sentient beings are karmically formed. Karmic potentiality, also known as habitual propensity, conditions the lived body to shape the life trajectory of a sentient being. From the Buddhist outlook, such a habitual propensity issues an egocentric type of operative intentionality that characterizes how a lived body is oriented towards causes and conditions. Turning to the teaching in Tibetan Buddhism, Longlian illustrates such a habitualized karmic tendency through several examples. Walking down a flight of stairs, a person who happens to miss one step would exclaim, “I have tripped”.⁸⁴ Similarly, out of suspicion of being sabotaged, a person would think that “someone wants to hurt me”.⁸⁵ The bodily tendency to maintain balance and the mental inclination to preserve self-interest are representative of an egocentric way for the lived body to orient with the world karmically. Such an egocentric orientation is known as innate self-attachment. As the root ignorance, self-attachment karmically forecloses the insight of emptiness and nurtures the habitual propensity of the lived body. Slowly and steadily, the lived body approaches things to appropriate them as essential entities for grasping and attachment. By virtue of such karmically efficacious intentionality,

⁸⁰ Fazun and Longlian, “*Ruzhonglun Jiangji Er*”, 14.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 117/146.

⁸² Park and Kopf, “Introduction”, 4.

⁸³ Longlian, “*Fojiao Daodeguan*”, 5.

⁸⁴ Longlian, “*Baifa Mingmen Lun Shi*”, 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

phenomena are actualized and integrated to the egocentric lifestyle of a sentient being, further naturalizing their self-attachment as a living habit.⁸⁶ The reciprocal interplay between the actualization of karmic actions from its propensity and the habitualization of karmic propensity through these actions, indicate the magnetic power of karmic causality, through which a sentient being is formed. Broadening the Euro-American articulation of operative intentionality, the Buddhist notion of karma discloses how the lived body of a sentient being is always egocentrically directed towards objects.⁸⁷

By virtue of karmic power, the self-making of a sentient being is also the making of their surroundings. This is how the bodily performance of ignorance becomes a repetitive act that normalizes the pursuit of “five yearnings” (*wuyu* 五欲): wealth, sensual desire, fame, delicacy, and leisure.⁸⁸ The root ignorance of emptiness and no-self, hence, informs regulatory norms as the conventions of an egocentric lifestyle. As Longlian scrutinizes in the excerpt above, egocentric pursuits can never be truly satisfied but always turn out to generate more defilements and afflictions. Going beyond one round of life, the magnetic power of karma becomes intergenerationally regulative, considering how habitual propensity is entrenched in the saṃsāric history of death and rebirth. Generation after generation, karma also shapes the world of sentient beings at the collective level:

The truth about the karmic efficacy of the saṃsāric history of death and rebirth can be challenging for people to accept. To be born on Earth is the efficacy of karmic power. To be born on other planets, if there are humans on these planets, is also the efficacy of karmic power. For us on Earth, if we die and become reborn as humans, it is most likely that we are still reborn here due to our “habit” (*xiguan* 習慣).⁸⁹

Acknowledging that the teaching of karma might sound incomprehensible to modern ears, Longlian is hesitant to reduce the shared world of sentient beings to a material reality. A world is also not a collective projection of minds. Rather, the shared world is sustained by the similar karmic habit that makes sentient beings into who they are.

In understanding Longlian’s view, I find it helpful to consult her examples of “collective karma” (*gongye* 共業) from when she was teaching in the meditation hall of her temple: “We are influenced by causes and conditions to sit here together, and this is collective karma. We can all see the flowers outside, which is also induced by our collective karma”.⁹⁰ From these examples, it can be inferred that collective karma entangles the interactive type of operative intentionality of sentient beings with a shared habit, which enables the constitution of a situation as the emergence of a collective setting. Following this line of reasoning, I propose to read a meaningful world inhabited by sentient beings, like our planet Earth, as a habitual domain of collective karma, which also bridges the gap between materialism and idealism in Cartesian dualism. Indeed, the world is neither a purely material entity nor a projection of the mind. Rather, it arises through

⁸⁶ I borrow the term naturalization from Alia Al-Saji to show how ignorance becomes sentient beings’ lifestyle. See Al-Saji, “The Racialization of Muslim Veils”.

⁸⁷ A parallel can indeed be drawn between this karmic view of habitual propensity and Martin Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*. I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this point. A preliminary discussion of this parallel can be found in Eric Nelson’s article “Language and Emptiness”.

⁸⁸ Longlian, “*Xinjing Qianshi*”, 205–06.

⁸⁹ Longlian, “*Baifa Mingmen Lun Shi*”, 32. For this account of a world as a product of collective karma, see also Longlian, “*Fojiao Daodeguan*”, 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

the joint karmic action.⁹¹ Complementing the accounts of collectivity in both Merleau-Ponty and Butler,⁹² Longlian suggests that a world karmically becomes a world when it is inhabited. Let us return to her example of a steamed bun: when the bun acquires its identity as the food to be served, a world with its economic system and hospitable culture is also made and sustained by the same types of causes and conditions. If this is the case, readers can deduce how and why self-making *is* world-making in the karmic process of dependent-arising: when sentient beings arise as cosmological individuals out of causes and conditions, as Kachru articulates, the cosmos/world as the domain of collective karma also habitually emerges out of the same karmic course. The habitual propensity of self-attachment permeates these two correlated aspects to establish social norms. In this manner, karmic performances in the formative processes of identity and sociality are cohered into the shared web of social norms.

4. Longlian's Buddhist Performative Phenomenology (II): Embodied Knowledge and Skilful Rehabitualization

It should be noted that the performative phenomenology of karma does not predetermine the possibility of a lived body, because the root ignorance, as Longlian foregrounds, is also a conditionally existent phenomenon that arises from causes and conditions.⁹³ That is why, as seen previously, Longlian promulgates that ignorance can be karmically removed through embodying the knowledge of emptiness and no-self. The concept of karma, thus, enables Buddhists to steer away from nihilism.⁹⁴ As I intend to underscore, it is the concept of karma that makes emptiness both descriptive in portraying how things are empty of an essential core and critically transformative in calling for changing the shared habitual propensity of essentializing identities.

The transformation of the habitual propensity of self-attachment is initiated through enacting an "aspiration" (*faxin* 發心).⁹⁵ Longlian recommends the aspiration for the bodhisattvas' path.⁹⁶ Bodhisattvas are practitioners who have preliminarily attained the embodied knowledge of emptiness and aspired to guide other sentient beings on the same path; this makes them exemplars of interconnectedness and compassion.⁹⁷ Under such an aspiration,⁹⁸ these bodhisattvas cultivate "six perfections" (*liudu* 六度) for rehabitualization: donating material and non-material goods to others, complying with monastic disciplines, forbearance of challenges, diligence in advancing practices, contemplative practices, and wisdom of no-self.⁹⁹

Longlian speaks of the practice of six perfections as a cultivation of two types of "embodied knowledge" (*bore* 般若, *prajñā*):

⁹¹ I have discussed Longlian's social ontology elsewhere (Li, "Meta-Ethical Pluralism", 167–75). I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to unpack this point.

⁹² See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*; Butler, *Notes*.

⁹³ Longlian, "Xinjing Qianshi", 204.

⁹⁴ For more discussion on this point, see Herschok, *Liberating Intimacy*; Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbana*; Gold, "Without Karma".

⁹⁵ Longlian, "Xinjing Qianshi", 204.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Joy Brennan has also illustrated the karmic efficacy of aspiration in the phenomenological study of the transformation from the ignorant mind to the no-mind. See Brennan, "The Buddhist Phenomenology of White Mind", 288.

⁹⁹ Longlian, "Xinjing Qianshi", 189.

The realization of the truth of no-self demands practice and implementation. Hence, it must be “performed” (*shixing* 實行). What shall be performed is countless. The bodhisattvas’ six perfections, which encompass ten thousand actions, amount to embodied knowledge in its depth and breadth, the scope of which is notably expansive. Among the six perfections, the first five pertain to “embodied knowledge in its breadth” (*guangbore* 廣般若), which is about the dimension of practice. The dimension of doctrine entails “embodied knowledge in its depth” (*shenbore* 深般若). Only when doctrinal thought is acquired can the truth be practiced accordingly. Here [in the *Heart Sūtra*], the depth refers to embodied knowledge in its depth. Embodied knowledge in its breadth, without leaving behind any phenomenon, is performed through all events of merit. Cleaning the halls and quarters inside the monastery, cleaning the restrooms, these are the practices of the Buddhist teaching. That is why the Chan maxim states that carrying water and firewood is the Buddhist teaching. “Labour” (*laodong* 勞動) is integral to embodied knowledge in its breadth, and it is the “bodily performance of venerating the Buddhist teaching” (*shenli gongyang* 身力供養).¹⁰⁰

Articulating the two dimensions of embodied knowledge, Longlian expatiates on how rehabilitationalization is realized through an intentional reorientation of the lived body together with its surroundings. It is to realize how dependent-arising is emptiness. Such a deep insight pinpoints emptiness as a dialectic activity devoid of bifurcation such as that of essentialism and nihilism, or that of theory and practice. As presented by Longlian, under the guidance of embodied knowledge in depth, the deep insight of emptiness is nourished reciprocally through embodied knowledge in its breadth.

To be clear, Longlian admonishes practitioners against overfocusing on textual studies. Recounting the history of Buddhist education in Chinese modernity, she regrets how there is a dearth of eminent masters, due to the prioritization of doctrinal learning at the expense of downplaying monastic labour.¹⁰¹ She speaks of labour, such as the basic tasks of cleaning, sweeping, and mopping, as the way of “fostering merit” (*peifu* 培福).¹⁰² It is the preparatory training through which new skills can be acquired for redirecting the operative intentionality of the lived body away from its habitual propensity of self-attachment. The performance of labour embodies the altruistic ethos of the bodhisattvas’ practice. That is why the labour of cleaning, sweeping, mopping, cooking, and so on, accumulates karmic merit. It reopens the possibility of transforming the habitual propensity of the lived body to nourish the deep insight of emptiness. The repetitive performance of labour remakes the identity of ordinary sentient beings into practitioners on the bodhisattvas’ path, through which norms related to the bodhisattvas’ practice are inhabited. Moreover, when performing labour mindfully and without ego-centric intentions, the performance reorients the lived body with its surroundings. Just like the remaking of an ordinary sentient being into a practitioner on the bodhisattvas’ path, karmic rearrangement also takes place spatially to enable the emergence of a monastic community under shared aspirations. While Longlian does not offer evidence for the karmic efficacy of this performative practice, contemporary ethnographic studies have confirmed its efficacy in building a Buddhist community of solidarity.¹⁰³

In section 2, it was explained that the creative acquisition of a new habit is crucial for the freedom of a lived body. Such freedom is formulated in Buddhist terms as the non-

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 190.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ For instance, see Kang, “Rural Women”.

hindrance of the skilful performance of the bodhisattvas, when they engage with others to guide them on the Buddhist path.¹⁰⁴ Skilfulness, thus, becomes the salient feature of agency. When the bodhisattvas' practice remakes the identity of sentient beings and reorients them to karmic causality, their world is transformed accordingly. This is where Longlian recuperates the possibility for Buddhist teaching to be conducive to this-worldly well-being:

Objecting to the unequal caste system and the habitual propensity of one's own defilement is the Buddhist outlook of revolution; three robes and one bowl without accumulation of private property express the Buddhist outlook against corruption. Vigorously cultivating meditative practices and embodied knowledge to comprehensively illuminate phenomena is the Buddhist outlook of pursuing truth. Perceiving all sentient beings equally as mothers and children is the Buddhist outlook of equality.¹⁰⁵

In this line of reasoning, Longlian clarifies how rehabitualization at the collective level also reshapes social norms to make a society more equal, inclusive, and mutually prosperous. This is why the view of interdependence can be translated into a vision for the peaceful co-thriving of all sentient beings, which excludes violent actions represented by waging wars.¹⁰⁶ As such, Longlian's thought not only renews the socially engaged ethos of Buddhism but also refines the phenomenological theory of rehabilitation. More importantly, her Buddhist performative phenomenology entails how she *does* Buddhism.

5. Enacting Buddhist Performative Phenomenology: Towards a More Process-oriented Feminism

Navigating the power dynamics of Chinese modernization, Longlian skilfully renews bodhisattva norms in modernity without an explicit rupture with the historical past of her tradition. She is acknowledged to have "embodied the best of both the traditional and the modern".¹⁰⁷ To recapitulate how it becomes possible for her to close the many dichotomies inherent to the modernist paradigm, I find it helpful to contextualize her way of living a Buddhist life in the changing power dynamics that reshaped the gender order in early twentieth-century China.¹⁰⁸ This contextualization can point to a plausible direction for answering why Chinese women turn to Buddhism. As readers will see, engaging with Buddhism through performative phenomenology, Longlian was among generations of Buddhist nuns and lay practitioners who carved out a different path for women in Chinese modernity.

Ever since the Han Dynasty (202BCE–220 CE), the gender order of Chinese societies was mostly regulated by Confucian norms.¹⁰⁹ In Confucian philosophy, everyone could

¹⁰⁴ Longlian, "Fojiao de Youliang", 18.

¹⁰⁵ Longlian, "Fojiao Daodeguan", 11.

¹⁰⁶ Longlian, "Fojiao de Youliang", 17.

¹⁰⁷ Kang, "Women, Gender, and Religion", 13.

¹⁰⁸ Due to the limited space, I confine my scope to the early twentieth century. A more thorough empirical investigation of Longlian's life-long biography, especially her life as a female monastic and her effort to revive monastic practice, has been done by Ester Bianchi. See Bianchi, *The Iron Statue*; *idem*, "Subtle Erudition"; *idem*, "Reading Equality". Building on these studies, I continue to provide a philosophical analysis of Longlian's way of living.

¹⁰⁹ For a critical reflection of this change in Han dynasty, see Wang, "Yinyang Gender Dynamics".

become the exemplary person through performing social roles in ethical relationships.¹¹⁰ These relationships were delineated through the “five relations” (*wulun*五倫) between “fathers and sons” (*fuzi*父子), “rulers and ministers” (*juncheng*君臣), “husbands and wives” (*fufu*夫婦), “older and younger brothers” (*xiongdì*兄弟), and “friends (*pengyou*朋友)”.¹¹¹ The wife should assist and be chaste for the husband, just like how the minister was expected to serve and be loyal to the ruler and how the children were supposed to respect and be filially pious to their parents.¹¹² Hence, the moral cultivation of virtues would start inside the family and be extended to the community, the state, and eventually the entire world.¹¹³ Such a cultivation interlinked the family with the state in the Confucian worldview of “isomorphism among the family, the state, and the world (*jiaguo-tianxiatonggou* 家國天下同構)”.¹¹⁴ It was also through this cultivation that a person became gendered as a “*nan*” (man, 男) or a “*nü*” (woman 女) in fulfilling the concrete roles of husbands and wives, daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, and so on.¹¹⁵ Ideally, when the moral potential was reached internally, social harmony was also realized externally. The inner-outer difference was further applied to the labour division of men and women since the inner quarter qua family was the womanly space whereas the outer quarter qua the state was the manly domain.¹¹⁶ As remarked by Lisa Rosenlee, such an inner-outer difference is dissimilar with the public-private distinction in Euro-American secularity, given the aforementioned family-state isomorphism.¹¹⁷ Regardless of the regulatory order of gender in the state ideology of Confucianism, Chinese women developed various strategies to mobilize discursive resources, especially Buddhism, to break through the wall between the inner and outer quarters, throughout history.¹¹⁸

Hence, premodern Chinese societies did not possess the vocabulary to convey the Euro-American demarcation of a socially constructed gender from a biologically determined sex.¹¹⁹ Rather, the *nan-nü* distinction was specified by social roles and relations. These relations in the Confucian context were supposed to be reciprocal and complementary, albeit hierarchical and unequal.¹²⁰ That was why the Confucian design of gender order was targeted by Chinese intellectuals, especially male elites from the mid-1800s onwards. Impressed by the triumph of Western modernization, these intellectuals became anxious about the threats of these colonial powers. Their anxiety drove

¹¹⁰ Such a Confucian view of selfhood is usually considered to be relational and developmental, although it remains different from the Buddhist view of emptiness and no-self. See, Ames, “The focus-field self”; Shun, “Conception of a Person”; Wong, “Relational and Autonomous Self”.

¹¹¹ An earlier articulation of these five relations can be found in *Mengzi*, 3A4.

¹¹² This is officially formulated as the “three bonds” (*sangang*三綱) by Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE). For more discussion about this notion in the Confucian gender discourse, see Pang-White, “Gender Discourse”.

¹¹³ For more discussion about the role of extending, see Lai, *Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, 35–49; Jiang, *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy*, 70–93.

¹¹⁴ Ames, *Living Chinese Philosophy*, 90.

¹¹⁵ For more discussion about the *nan-nü* differentiation, see Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 49–94.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹¹⁸ This is particularly the case for women who embraced the more military-related virtues. See Yin, “Rewarding Female Commanders”; Wu, “Sword and Lotus”. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Buddhism offered a way to lift women out of domesticity. Moreover, the Buddhist discourse was mobilized by women to claim power in the political arena. See Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao*; Balkwill, *The Women Who Ruled China*.

¹¹⁹ Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women*, 45.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 157. Contemporary scholars have rearticulated a more egalitarian and feminist version of Confucian ethics. See Herr, “Confucian Family-State and Women”; Li, *Reshaping Confucianism*; Rosenlee, *Confucian Feminism*; Pang-White et. al., “Symposium”.

them to embrace the modernist paradigm of European Enlightenment with a call for rationalization, secularization, and industrialization.¹²¹

In the modernist paradigm, the public-private distinction was central to the formation of a citizen in a state, which continued to establish a gender order that defined the public sphere as masculine, the private sphere as feminine.¹²² The nation-building project of China, then, necessitated the reconceptualization of personhood, family, state, as well as the gender order.¹²³ Upon labelling the Confucian kinship system as counterproductive to national advancement, progressive intellectuals foregrounded the liberation of women from traditional family structures through education.¹²⁴ Gradually, the ideal of “new women (*xin nǚxing* 新女性)” became established in contrast to the suffering victims of backward traditionality.¹²⁵ While the concept of new women became a global phenomenon in the early 1920s,¹²⁶ it took on a specific form in early republican China (1912–1949). In the 1930s, the republican government launched the “New Life Movement” (*xinshenghuo yundong* 新生活運動), in which the “new women” were expected to work like men in the public sphere and take up care duties as the Confucian style good wives and wise mothers for men in the private sphere.¹²⁷ When the second Sino-Japanese war broke out, the “new women” ideal also issued the need for Chinese women to defend their country against the Japanese invasion.¹²⁸ As Xiaofei Kang succinctly puts it, “[t]he ‘new women’ would be a rational and independent thinker ... At the same time she was required to fulfill the roles of ‘good wives and wise mothers,’ thus making her a suitable companion for the modern man”.¹²⁹ Recounting the rise of the “new women” ideal in modern China, Dorothy Ko debunks how such a super-person-like woman cannot possibly exist in reality but rather crystalizes the modernist, patriarchal expectations for Chinese women.¹³⁰

Living through these changing power dynamics, Longlian was among generations of Buddhist women in China and Chinese diaspora who resisted arranged marriage and traditional familial roles but also kept reservation about the “new women” ideal in their rejection of getting married out of free love.¹³¹ They rediscovered the life as a Buddhist

¹²¹ For this discussion, see Spence, *A Search for Modern China*.

¹²² That is why contemporary European scholars like Ruth Rubio-Marín advocate for making policies and legal changes to “feminize” the public sphere and “masculinize” the private sphere (Rubio-Marín, “The (Dis)establishment of Gender”, 788–789). For the discussion of the gender order in a modern state, see Connell, *Gender and Power*; MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*; Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*; Rubio-Marín, “The (Dis)establishment of Gender”.

¹²³ The writings of two representatives, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Jin Tianhe (1873–1947) can be found in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, edited by Lydia H. Lu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko. Their writings prefigured the more explicit and radical call for this project by intellectuals like Hu Shih (1891–1962) during the May Fourth Movement in 1919. For a historical study of the changing views on family and state, see Zhao, *Jiating Geming*.

¹²⁴ For the promotion of women’s education, see Bailey, *Gender and Education*; Herschatter, *Women in China*; Malony, Theiss, and Choi, *Gender in Modern East Asia*.

¹²⁵ For the so-called “Women’s Question” in Chinese modernity, see Barlow, *The Question of Women*; Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*.

¹²⁶ For this phenomenon, see Weinbaum et. al., *The Modern Girl*.

¹²⁷ This normative ideal was promulgated as the official ideology by the first lady Soong Mei-ling (1898–2003) and the legislator Fu Yan (1903–?). See Soong, “Xinshenghuo Yundong”; Fu, *Funü de Xinshenghuo*.

¹²⁸ Soong, “Zhanzheng yu Zhongguo”.

¹²⁹ Kang, “Women, Gender, and Religion”, 6. Kang also underscores how the republican government mobilized women during the second Sino-Japanese war.

¹³⁰ Ko, “Ba ‘Chuantong’ Fanyi”, 33.

¹³¹ Among them, we can count Lü Bicheng (1883–1943), Zhang Ruzhao (1900–1969), Guan Yuan (1899–1986), and the Buddhist nuns in the city of Wuhan in central China like Deying (?–1936) and Hengbao (fl. 1930s). For a social history of these nuns, see Yuan, “Chinese Buddhist Nuns”; DeVido, “Network”.

nun during the drastic transition of their country and their religion. At that time, Buddhism, just like Confucianism, was branded archaic and antithetical to national advancement.¹³² Moreover, Buddhists had to wrestle with the long-standing Confucian critique that Buddhist practitioners would reduce this-worldly life to a non-existent illusion in their pursuit of emptiness and reject ethical responsibilities in their decision to be ordained monastics.¹³³

Against this backdrop, the first generation of Buddhist reformers like Taixu initiated various types of reforms to make Buddhism on par with modernity.¹³⁴ In particular, Taixu reaffirmed the role of karmic efficacy to repopularise the bodhisattvas' practice through which an ideal society of equality, peace, and prosperity can be constituted as the pure land on Earth.¹³⁵ To make Buddhism more socially engaged, Taixu founded several Buddhist academies to train monastics into modern citizens.¹³⁶ This movement is later known as humanistic Buddhism.¹³⁷ Taixu's disciple Fazun further designated a rigorous study and practice of Buddhism as the key to restoring the true Buddhist teaching in a modern society. Thus, Fazun translated Tibetan Buddhist texts into the Chinese language, further joining his master Taixu to promote monastic education.¹³⁸ Given how Fazun's revival of Buddhist scholasticism restored what Eyal Aviv refers to as the "redemptive potential" of Buddhism to eliminate social suffering and turmoil, I have argued for acknowledging Fazun's effort as a practice of social activism.¹³⁹

As a student of Fazun, Longlian followed in the footsteps of these pioneers of humanistic Buddhism to promote a rigorous study and practice of Buddhism. As recounted by Ester Bianchi, Longlian considered the founding of the Sichuan Academy of Buddhist Nuns and the reinstatement of the dual-ordination in monastic disciplines for nuns as her most outstanding achievements.¹⁴⁰ These two achievements are in line with the embodied knowledge in its depth and breadth, which showcase Longlian's skilful performance of remaking the identity of a nun and reorganizing the monastic community for nuns as a family of shared aspirations.

Like many women who converted to Buddhism, Longlian never thought about getting married. As she shared with her biographer later in her life, marriage was an "event of suffering" (*kushi* 苦事).¹⁴¹ She recalled how learned women in her family like her own

¹³² For this background, see Welch, *The Buddhist Revival*.

¹³³ I have detailed this critique and the Buddhist response to it. See Li, "Meta-Ethical Pluralism"; *idem*, "Reorienting Illusory Convention".

¹³⁴ Taixu's writings have been collected in *Taixu Dashi Quanshu*. There has been a mature scholarship on Taixu's Buddhist reform. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*; Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*; Jones, *Taixu's*.

¹³⁵ I have argued elsewhere how the humanistic, socially-engaged version of Buddhism, as promoted by Taixu and Fazun, serves as both a strong rejection of the nihilist reading of Buddhism and a rediscovery of the bodhisattvas' practice (Li, "Reorienting Illusory Convention", 426–436). That is why I proffer that the modernization of Chinese Buddhism is better interpreted as a renewal of – not a rupture with – the historical past of the tradition (Li, "Reorienting Illusory Convention", 425).

¹³⁶ The remaking of monastic identity through reforming Buddhist education has been detailed by Rongdao Lai. See Lai, *Praying for the Republic*.

¹³⁷ For more discussion about this concept, see Travagnin, "Humanistic Buddhism".

¹³⁸ Fazun's essays on Buddhism have been collected in *Fazun Fashi Foxuelunwen Ji*. For the scholarship on Fazun's accomplish, see, Sullivan, *Venerable Fazun*; Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhists*; Wang, *Interpreting Fazun*; Wu, *Esoteric Buddhism*.

¹³⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, if we follow Aviv's argument that the resurgence of Buddhist scholasticism aims to revitalize the redemptive potential of Buddhist philosophy, then we can and also should reappraise Fazun's scholastic approach to humanistic Buddhism as a social activism, broadly construed. See Aviv, *Differentiating the Pearl*, 19–20.

¹⁴⁰ Bianchi, "Subtle Erudition", 302–03.

¹⁴¹ The following account has been documented by her Chinese biographer Qiu Shanshan. See Qiu and Longlian, "Yu Longlian Fashi de Duihua", 225.

mother and grandmothers did not have a writing desk at home after marriage but could only manage family affairs and raise children.¹⁴² The suffering nature of marriage was, of course, not caused by specific male individuals. For Longlian, her father and grandfathers were the best type of men who were decent, kind, educated, and socially responsible, yet, in a “patriarchal society” (*nanquan shehui* 男權社會), their wives still had no independent personalities and were not their equals.¹⁴³ Contextualizing Longlian’s view on marriage in the changing power dynamics of early republican China, readers can discern a conspicuous awareness of such gendered dynamics.

Interestingly, in his proposal for humanistic Buddhism, Taixu encouraged women to become lay practitioners, not ordained nuns, a standpoint expressed by this master in his 1941 correspondence with Buddhist women at Macao’s Kung Tak Lam Temple.¹⁴⁴ Philosophically, their exchange revolved around the Buddhist approach to gender and nunhood.¹⁴⁵ 1941 was also the year when Longlian became ordained. Quite different from scholarly expectation, Longlian hardly penned anything on this topic in her writings on Buddhist philosophy. This absence necessitates a shift to her monastic performance.

From her biography and the memorial articles of her students, it can be inferred that she was mindful of issues related to gender and nunhood. When her biographer asked her about the more demanding “monastic disciplines” (*jie* 戒, *vinaya*) for Buddhist nuns, Longlian remarked that “male superiority and female inferiority in the conventional world is surely to be mirrored in religions”.¹⁴⁶ Her student Ven. Ruyi also recalled:

Our “esteemed teacher” (*enshi* 恩師) led a monastic life for over sixty years. She always upheld high aspirations, further taking it as her responsibility to sustain the family of the Buddha and becoming detached from the eight-four “compartments” (*tai* 態) of women. Our esteemed teacher always taught us about this inside the classroom: “The way in which a woman becomes a woman is about her attitudes and compartments of pleasing others and competing for favours. To be ordained as a Buddhist nun is to overcome this ‘habitual propensity’ (*xiqi* 習氣) and become a ‘great person’ (*dazhangfu* 大丈夫). Throughout my entire life, I have never had one thought to seek favours from men”. This is what our esteemed teacher said, and this is also what she did. Regardless of the hardships and challenges in various situations, she always harboured a firm conviction and adhered to monastic disciplines.

This short excerpt gives us a glimpse of Longlian’s philosophical approach to gender/sex. In line with the view of the karmic formation and transformation of identity, she does not perceive womanhood in an essentialist manner. In her terms, *a woman becomes a woman*

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ A summary of this correspondence was composed by Jiang Zhiping 江之萍 and published in the journal *Jueyin* 覺音 in 1941. A reprint of this article also appeared in the journal *Jueyouqing* 覺有情. For more historical background of this discussion between Taixu and Buddhist women see, Su, “Yifang zhishi”; DeVido, “Network”; Chang, “Taixu Dashi”.

¹⁴⁵ More specifically, their exchange was about the depreciative images of women in Buddhist texts and Taixu’s discouragement of women to be ordained nuns. See Jiang, “Yige yu Xuefofunü”. Contributing to this discussion, Guan Yuan addresses these two issues with three arguments: first, “women” is defined through compartments and actions, which discounts any essentialist understanding of gender/sex; second, the so-called depreciative accounts of women were utilized by the Buddha not to belittle women but to encourage them to karmically transform their compartments to become a great person; third, Buddhist nuns should be defined through their monastic virtue and embodied knowledge of emptiness, not merely by their conventionally gendered identity. See, Guan Yuan, “Hegu Qingni”. As readers can see, Guan Yuan also engages with Buddhism through performative phenomenology, whose viewpoints is highly likely to be applauded by Longlian as well.

¹⁴⁶ Qiu and Longlian, “Yu Longlian Fashi de Duihua”, 220.

through performing a specific set of attitudes and comportments. Hence, gender identity is karmically formed through performances that also give rise to a sentient being as such. This formative process of a gendered sentient being is cohered into a larger social web that conditions the shared habitual propensity of innate self-attachment and identity essentialization. Normatively, it is also the regulatory function of this shared propensity that karmically shapes the expectations of social roles and relations – women are expected to please others and compete for the favours of men in a patriarchal society.

To become a nun, then, is to overcome such a habitual propensity that has been internalized through an intergenerational practice of patriarchal norms. Nunhood, thus, is not a third gender that explains away gender differences.¹⁴⁷ As the instantiation of the great person, it does not convey gender-neutrality.¹⁴⁸ As the anthropologist Paula Arai accentuates in her ethnographical study of contemporary Japanese Zen Buddhist nuns, “they [i.e. Buddhist nuns] were not running away from gendered-determined roles to nongendered nonroles. Instead they were redefining their gender and roles in terms of the Buddhist monastic life of women”.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, to become a nun is to performatively challenge and criticize the modernist and patriarchal expectations for women, with a call to transform these expectations in the realization of a great person.¹⁵⁰ As remarked by her disciple, this is what Longlian said about becoming a nun and this is also what this scholar-nun did.

Concrete work and practices are indispensable for becoming a nun. In Longlian’s detailed discussion of the bodhisattvas’ practice, the habitual propensity of self-attachment can be transformed through embodying the knowledge of emptiness in its depth and breadth, which prescribes the need for monastics to integrate their textual study of philosophy with labour-related practices. On this front, while education inside Buddhist academies furnishes practitioners the chance to deepen the insight of emptiness, the labour-related practice in conformity to monastic disciplines enables these practitioners to embody and enact their philosophical insight. Buddhist education and monastic disciplines, thus, lay the groundwork for rehabitualization.

In her promotion of monastic education and discipline, Longlian carries on both Taixu’s initiative of training monastics into modern citizens and Fazun’s mission of restoring the true Buddhist teaching in a modern society. Adding to the cause of making Buddhism more socially engaged, Longlian also shares the motivation of Buddhist nuns at that time that a robust education cultivates the embodied knowledge of emptiness and prepares novice nuns for becoming experts of humanistic Buddhism.¹⁵¹ The skilfulness, thus, makes monastics, be they monks or nuns, qualified for preserving the true Buddhist teaching in and for a modern society. To embody the knowledge of

¹⁴⁷ Among scholars of Buddhist feminism, it remains popular to read the Buddhist view of emptiness in a way that explains gender away. See Gross, *Buddhism beyond Gender*. I have argued elsewhere how and why gender/sex as an illusory phenomenology should be understood not descriptively but also critically (Li, “Eroding Sexism”; *idem*, “What is Shared”).

¹⁴⁸ For a discussion of the great person in premodern Buddhism, especially Chan/Zen, see Levering, “‘Raihaitokuzui’ and Dōgen’s”.

¹⁴⁹ Arai, *Women Living Zen*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Hsiao-Lan Hu has specified the critical role of the Buddhist view of no-self in the discussion of ethics. See Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbana*. I want to push further to draw from the performance of Buddhist nuns to show the critical and transformative role of the practice of ordainment.

¹⁵¹ Such a motivation has been expressed by Chinese Buddhist nuns in different regions at that time. See Guan Yuan, “Hegu Qingni”; Nicai, “Cong Funü Jiefang”.

emptiness, these Buddhist nuns will go through a systematic education in Buddhist academies and comply with monastic disciplines such as the dual-ordination practice. The remaking of their identity into an exemplary nun is also the reorganizing of the monastic community into what Longlian considers to be a family of shared aspirations founded by the Buddha. She speaks of this monastic family as a family “tied by the Buddhist teaching” (*faqin* 法親), in contrast to the conventional family “tied by kinship” (*xueyuan* 血緣).¹⁵² In her 1994 reinterpretation of the community building principles in monastic disciplines as those of “peaceful co-existence” (*hepinggongchu* 和平共處), “democracy” (*minzhu* 民主), and “impartiality” (*dagongwusi* 大公無私), Longlian is confident that “the Buddhist teaching can be harmonized (*xietiao* 協調) with socialism (*shehuizhuyi* 社會主義) and suited to a global community of unity (*shijiedatong* 世界大同).”¹⁵³ A monastic community, in its adherence to those principles, can be commensurable with and contributive to a modern society.

And these two aspects of her monastic performance, namely, remaking of identity and reorganization of community, have been underscored by her student Ruyi at the beginning of the excerpt above. Inside the Buddhist community, these two aspects renew the norms related to the bodhisattvas’ practice, a renewal that is not an automatic repetition but breathes a fresh new life to the socially engaged ethos of Buddhism. Beyond the Buddhist community, monastic performance reorganizes the temple-space into a lived space that is both the public workplace for these nuns to engage in social activities and the private home for a monastic family. Subsequently, various possibilities become reopened for these nuns to receive education, pursue freedom, and make space for their community, all the while contributing to their country and their religion. Accordingly, a different way of living, as an alternative to the “new women” ideal, becomes carved out and normalized in Chinese modernity. It is true that Chinese Buddhist nuns like Longlian did not thoroughly fulfil the emancipatory goals of dismantling all the patriarchal and modernist norms. As Longlian acknowledges, religious communities always mirror the male superiority and female inferiority in the conventional world. However, in the process of rigorously studying and practicing Buddhism, these nuns lived out a monastic life to destabilize these patriarchal and modernist norms in the rehabilitation of their identity and the reorganization of their communal space, which makes it possible to envision the realization of emancipatory goals.

From the perspective of performative phenomenology, I proffer to recognize Longlian’s way of living as a more process-oriented feminism that prioritizes the process for cultivating practical knowledge, skilfulness, and resilience, a process that serves as the necessary condition for the possibility of realizing emancipatory goals. As highlighted by Sara Ahmed, feminism is a life question.¹⁵⁴ Jin Y. Park adds that “[a] life needs to be lived and understood before being judged by existing norms of our community”.¹⁵⁵ The life lived out by Buddhist nuns like Longlian, thus, allows for reimagining what feminism can be. Just like how humanistic Buddhism becomes a new normal among contemporary Buddhist practitioners through the effort of forerunners like Taixu and Fazun, the

¹⁵² Longlian, “Fojiao Daodeguan”, 6.

¹⁵³ Longlian, “Fojiao de Youliang”, 17.

¹⁵⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2.

¹⁵⁵ Park, *Women and Buddhist Philosophy*, 3.

ordination of nuns also becomes a new normal within humanistic Buddhism through the effort of pioneers like Longlian and her fellow Buddhist women.

6. Conclusion: From *I-Can* to *We-Can*

When the “new women” ideal rose to prominence in the 1920s, the famous leftwing writer Lu Xun (1881–1936) shared his reflection on Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* with students at Beijing Normal University for Women.¹⁵⁶ His main question, which was also the title of his speech in 1923, was “What happens after Nora leaves home?”¹⁵⁷ For Lu Xun, the personal pursuit of emancipatory goals should be supported by the socio-economic system.¹⁵⁸ Without economic resources, women who left home like Nora in *A Doll’s House* were destined to either “go to the bad” (namely, go into prostitution), or “return to her husband”.¹⁵⁹ This speech was later published in 1924. About a decade later, Longlian did secure economic resources with her stable position at the provincial government of Sichuan. She never entered marriage to form a family in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, this scholar-nun, as well as generations of Buddhist women at that time, carved out a possibility that frequently escaped the attention of intellectuals, a possibility that unfolded in the process of living a Buddhist, feminist life.

Shifting the focus from the emancipatory goals to the cultivating process, I want to invite the readers to deliberate upon how this Buddhist, feminist life is a way of closing the many dichotomies, as that between textual studies and monastic practice, between knowing and doing, and between traditionality and modernity. In her engagement with Buddhism through performative phenomenology, Longlian outlines how the embodied knowledge of emptiness is karmically effective in the remaking of identity and community, a knowledge that requires cultivation of skilfulness through monastic education and disciplines. That is why the salient feature of such a Buddhist cultivation is about avoiding extremes and closing bifurcations.

Dualistic thinking has its own intellectual history in the Euro-American context.¹⁶⁰ The rise of Cartesian dualism during the Enlightenment movement reinforced dualistic thinking in the modernist paradigm to pronounce a teleological view of history. In his philosophical analysis, Charles Taylor traces how Descartes identifies the thinking mind as the indisputable foundation of knowledge, further rendering reason disengaged from lived experience and the world disenchanted into a mechanical entity.¹⁶¹ When the sense of selfhood becomes internalized in the thinking mind as a pregiven subject for experience, philosophers soon find the nature of subjectivity, body, and subjectivation to be paradoxical. More importantly, history is envisioned teleologically with the final goal of the thinking mind to conquer the unthinking world. Such a teleology soon

¹⁵⁶ The English translation of this article has been compiled in the edited volume *Silent China*.

¹⁵⁷ Lu Xun, “What Happens”, 148.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 152–54.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁶⁰ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for the need to demarcate Cartesian dualism from dualistic thinking in general. This is where I find Charles Taylor’s discussion in *Sources of the Self* helpful. Taylor has outlined the origin of various types of dichotomies that predated Descartes, such as the material-immaterial divide, the reason-desire distinction, and the form-matter bifurcation in ancient Greek philosophy, or the inner-outer distinction in medieval scholastic philosophy. In the advent of the Enlightenment period, these dichotomies became subservient to the Cartesian turn toward the subject.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 146. Also see Descartes, *Discourses*, 28–30.

provokes a feeling of coming too late among non-Westerners, especially women. In Alia Al-Saji's terms, "The radicalized subject feels herself coming too late, projected back to a perpetual past, in a linear timeline that begins with ancient Greece and where Eurocentric civilization constitutes modernity".¹⁶² This linear view of temporality betrays what Serene J. Khader calls "Enlightenment teleology".¹⁶³

Is it possible to change the feeling of coming too late to a sense of coming up? This is where I find the feminist life of Buddhist women like Longlian inspiring and empowering, since they present to us the possibility of reimagining a more process-oriented type of feminism. Cultivating skilfulness in their monastic performances, they refine the embodied knowledge of emptiness to forge a path as an alternative to the "new women" ideal. And this cultivation continues throughout generations.

Before her ordainment, Longlian taught at women's middle schools. When she started teaching at the Sichuan Academy of Buddhist nuns, she was dedicated to fostering more talents among the monastic community. Readers might already notice her accessible way of unpacking Buddhist philosophy. Longlian preferred colloquial language and paired abstract thoughts with stories. She was also mindful of promoting new students in her academy as future scholars, teachers, and leaders. When Longlian entrusted her student, Ven. Changhui, with the task of teaching Buddhist philosophy, Changhui was very nervous.¹⁶⁴ It was the first time for Changhui to stand at the podium. During the class, Longlian was sitting among other students and constantly nodding. After class, Longlian told Changhui that this first-timer did a great job. Longlian also reminded Changhui of "the mutual benefit of teaching and learning" (*jiaoxue xiangzhang* 教學相長).¹⁶⁵ In Longlian's terms, a talented teacher is formed through continuous "exercise" (*duanlian* 鍛鍊).¹⁶⁶ I interpret this as Longlian's method of instilling confidence in Changhui: no one is born to know how to teach but one can always become a good teacher through actual engagement with students and using student feedback for improvement. Now, Changhui is the resident abbot of Qianfo Temple and teaches at the Chongqing Buddhist Academy.

Renowned for her adherence to monastic disciplines, Longlian also took good care of her students. In a commemorative article, her student, the previously mentioned Ven. Ruyi, the current head of the Sichuan Academy of Buddhist Nuns, recounted one summer break in the academy, when fewer students came to the hall to perform the ritual of morning and evening chanting during the heat wave.¹⁶⁷ Longlian asked each student about their absence. Knowing that some students might just come up with excuses, Longlian still comforted them and let them rest, which elicited grave "shame" (*cankui* 慚愧) in these novice nuns.¹⁶⁸ As Longlian emphasized in her lecture, shame is a crucial virtue, because "when the Buddha compliments a disciple as a good student, the Buddha always says that this disciple knows shame".¹⁶⁹ Longlian could have wielded her power and authority over these novice nuns to reproach them. Indeed,

¹⁶² Al-Saji, "Durée", 103.

¹⁶³ Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 81.

¹⁶⁴ Changhui, "Cibei Zhihui", 86. Changhui's article is in the special remembrance issue for Longlian.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ruyi, "Mingxin de Zhuisi", 83. Ruyi's article is also part of the special issue mentioned above.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Longlian, "Baifa Mingmen Lun Shi", 114.

given her high rank in her community, she could have done so quite easily. But that was not her approach. Skilfully, Longlian embodied compassion, understanding, and care, which, in return, motivated her students to reflect on their behaviours for improvement. Longlian's skilfulness was showcased through how she saw through causes and conditions to reorient with her students karmically and reorganize the situation into a teaching moment. Her students understood the lesson and harboured the incentive to ameliorate their training. Their respect for their teacher and leader, Longlian, also grew. Collaboratively, the performances of Longlian and her students were indispensable in building a community of solidarity, equality, and morality.

Bringing together women with the shared aspirations of pursuing the bodhisattvas' path, Longlian effectively rearranged causes and conditions to craft moments for perfecting the embodied knowledge of emptiness. Rearticulating the monastic community as a family founded by Śakyamuni Buddha,¹⁷⁰ Longlian stressed the importance of emulating role models, especially eminent nuns, in Buddhist history.¹⁷¹ And she has become such a role model for her student until today. As an erudite master of *doing* Buddhism, Longlian continues to inspire her students as their "esteemed master" (*enshi* 恩師) and "compassionate mother" (*cimu* 慈母).¹⁷² For Longlian and her students, their performance remakes their identity into Buddhist nuns. Concurrently, such performance also renews bodhisattva norms and rejuvenates the Bhikṣuṇī community as a lived space with its own history. Harmonizing the many dichotomies in the modernist discourse, Longlian lived out a life that epitomizes the possibility of closing the rift between "new women" and "traditional women". It is a life where a new type of agency becomes cultivated as the skilfulness of practice that allows for the *I-can* of a Bhikṣuṇī. Generation after generation,¹⁷³ the *I-can* becomes the *We-can* of Buddhist nuns who map out a discursive and lived space for Chinese women beyond the Enlightenment teleology of Eurocentric modernism.

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¹⁷⁰ Longlian, "Fojiao Daodeguan", 6.

¹⁷¹ Longlian, "Baifa Mingmen Lun Shi", 34.

¹⁷² Ruyi, "Mingxin de Zhuishi", 82.

¹⁷³ For a social history of nuns' networks in modern Chinese Buddhism, see DeVido, "Network and Bridges".

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