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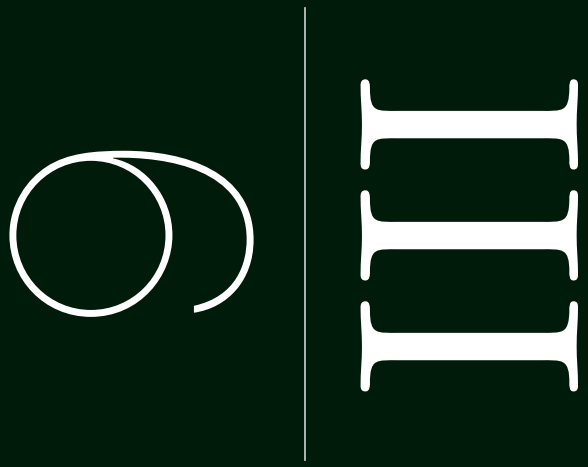

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Ghost Daughters and Bar Girls: Negotiating Marginal Womanhood in Taiwan

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Abstract

In Taiwan, traditional norms of womanhood are deeply rooted in Confucian ideals that emphasize filial piety, marriage, and reproduction. Women are generally defined in relation to their roles within the family, and those who operate outside of these norms—such as Buddhist nuns and sex workers—are frequently marginalized. These women are particularly visible because they deviate from the expected life trajectory for Taiwanese women, yet they are remarkably rare and receive limited scholarly attention. This paper explores how these two groups, though extremely different in lifestyle and public perception, challenge prevailing definitions of Taiwanese womanhood by existing outside of expected familial and gendered roles. Drawing on legal history and personal narratives, this paper analyzes how both Buddhist nuns and sex workers are conditionally accepted by the country based on their perceived utility to national or familial interests. While Buddhist nuns have gained broader acceptance due to their alignment with values like charity, cultural preservation, and international diplomacy, sex workers remain criminalized and stigmatized, despite often serving as primary providers for their families. The instability of their legal and social status reveals how Taiwanese society continues to discipline non-conforming women based on fluctuating political and economic interests. By centering the lives of Buddhist nuns and sex workers, this paper complicates the dominant narratives of gender and progress in Taiwan, showing how womanhood is still tied to patriarchal expectations, even in the context of apparent autonomy or resistance.

Introduction

Taiwanese culture and society have historically placed a strong emphasis on familial connections, developing the concept of filial piety. Stemming from 4th-century Confucian values that viewed the family as a crucial unit and the foundation of a strong nation, filial piety emphasizes one's responsibility to respect and care for one's elders and has been a consistent core value.[1] With the importance of familial relations and the continuation of those relations from generation to generation, for Taiwanese women, marriage and reproduction are perceived as fundamental responsibilities.[2] That this tradition is reified by family values, societal structures, and relationships within communities raises the question of what kind of Taiwanese woman would dare to "step out" of the filial system. Who are these women? And what is their social, legal, and economic position in existing at the limits of patriarchal expectation?

Among the few who visibly resist these norms, two subject positions stand out: Buddhist nuns and sex workers, for each reconfigures the meaning of womanhood that the filial tradition eschews. Analyzing the realities of Buddhist nuns and sex workers in Taiwan reveals not only their social positions in the contemporary world but also the economic, legal, and international frameworks governing the country. Put differently, centering Taiwanese Buddhist nuns and sex workers as not-so-minor figures in Taiwanese society allows for an exploration of the subtle methods Taiwanese institutions use to encourage and rebuke women situated most clearly outside of familial reproduction and filial piety.

Upon evaluating these facets, it becomes evident that by visibly existing, both Buddhist nuns and sex workers destabilize Taiwanese conceptions of women. In this context, "destabilize" refers to how their existence fails to comply with traditional norms of feminine responsibility to the family and the nation. This, however, does not preclude these women from those institutions where womanhood has been traditionally defined; they do not exist entirely outside of traditional conceptions of womanhood. These women are strategically and subtly enfolded. Sex workers, for instance, are generally shunned by society, yet

[1] Mei-Hua Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," in *International Approaches to Prostitution Law and Policy in Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 145–153.
[2] Hillary Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood: The Choice of Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns," *Faculty Publications* (2004), 8-10, https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/soanfac_pubs/1.

the state embraces them when they are needed to support national interests. Once sex workers serve no national value, however, they are disregarded and antagonized through law and discourse. Sex workers, though often socially outcast, sometimes play a crucial role in their families' financial well-being, even within the traditional family structure. This brief example of oscillating positions—a sort of contradiction—reveals how Taiwanese society delicately balances disciplining sex workers according to their usefulness and supposed danger.

Historical and Social Foundations of Taiwanese Womanhood

Traditional Concepts of Womanhood

Stemming from Confucian values of ancient China, namely the five fundamental relationships (ruler and subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend), women have been defined by their relationship to others as opposed to occupying their own category independently, something more common for men.[3] Prior to the 20th-century invention of the word "women" in the Chinese language, which followed Western influence, females could only identify with terms such as wife, mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law, depending on the circumstance.[4] As a result, women were always viewed in relation to men or the family unit as a whole, rarely as individuals with personal desires and aspirations.[5]

Connecting these realities to modern-day Taiwan, women often advocate for their rights through the lens of a particular role they hold within the family.[6] The power a woman possesses and the leverage she uses to back her ideas have much to do with her positionality in society. For instance, women may fight for greater power within society or in relation to their husbands on the grounds of being a mother, with their centrality in terms of both responsibility for and connection to their children being the primary justification for greater influence.[7] Essentially, feminism in Taiwan is more heavily based on rights as a wife, mother, or daughter, for example, instead of rights as a singular woman. Since advocacy and additional rights were generally fought for and gained by women individually, or sometimes in groups based on certain roles,

[3] Hwei-syin Lu, "Transcribing Feminism: Taiwanese Women's Experiences," in *Women in the New Taiwan: Gender Roles and Gender Consciousness in a Changing Society*, ed. Catherine Farris, Murray A. Rubinstein, and Anru Lee, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 224–241.
[4] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 18.
[5] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 18.
[6] Lu, "Transcribing Feminism," 225-226, 238-241.
[7] Lu, "Transcribing Feminism," 225-226, 238-241.

feminist movements with and for a combined group of women with noticeably different characteristics are relatively scarce.[8] This results in a less unified sense of feminism and a less connected community of feminists generally throughout Taiwan.

Furthermore, historically, when Chinese women broke norms associated with what women could accomplish, instead of that action redefining what women as a whole could do, they'd have personally "achieved" greater status and respect, reminiscent of what men naturally had.[9] In ancient China, for example, women who'd earned rare positions in male-dominated careers were generally treated with the same respect their male colleagues had, as if they were simply men themselves.[10]

The Emergence of Feminist Thought

This history is relevant since it shows the rigid context in which Taiwanese women operate, where their legitimacy is defined in relation to the men in their lives. As a result, if a woman removes herself from those men, by not pursuing marriage and children or distancing herself from her parents, her personhood exists in a realm that is not clearly defined, and therefore threatens the traditional functioning of society. While different in many ways, Buddhist nuns and sex workers have both paved a certain path in Taiwanese society, often with harsh judgment, while disrupting many of these existing norms.

Buddhist nuns operate primarily outside of the family and nation, given their physical distance and a different set of values, which alienates them from traditionally defined womanhood. They generally leave behind their lives and those around them to live in a Buddhist monastery where they follow many religious practices, such as vegetarianism, meditation routines, and celibacy. While Buddhism has some history rooted in misogyny, with beliefs such as women bearing a karmic burden and needing to be reborn as men in order to achieve enlightenment, modern Taiwanese Buddhism is heavily dominated by women, including in leadership positions, and generally promotes marriage and children as an individual decision.[11] While various Buddhist organizations actively

[8] Lu, "Transcribing Feminism," 230.
[9] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 18-21.
[10] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 18-21.
[11] David C. Schak, "Gender and Buddhism in Taiwan," *Griffith Research Online* (2008), 153-154, 156, 162-164, https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/items/718d7b3c-502e-58e0-befd-aeca095f33ea.; Ling Han and Chengpang Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists: Two Models of Women's Social Engagement in Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 19, no. 3 (February 2016): 59, 65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26418518.

contribute to Taiwan's political climate, there's also a fairly widespread critical attitude toward daughters leaving behind their traditional lives in favor of the Buddhist lifestyle.[12]

In terms of sex workers, they generally operate outside of the public sphere, given the stigmatization and criticism that comes with their lifestyle. Sex work, while technically legal in Taiwan, is limited to certain designated areas, none of which are currently declared.[13] Therefore, sex workers, who've typically chosen that path for economic reasons, especially given the potential for a salary much higher than that of normal jobs available to lower-class women, are a generally underground and unrepresented community.[14] Though economically prosperous in some cases, the stigma surrounding sex work is extremely prevalent, with many anti-prostitution movements arguing that sex work greatly diminishes female power and agency.[15] Sex workers' lifestyle is generally seen as a violation of what Taiwanese womanhood is meant to entail, given their intimate relations with multiple men, which means they cannot be defined specifically in relation to any one man. With the lack of structure concerning sex work in Taiwan, sex workers have vastly different experiences. In the context of the family, sex workers are rarely ever socially or openly accepted, yet there are some instances in which, despite this, sex workers are the breadwinners of their families, supporting their parents and brothers.[16]

The concern with women builds on a growing body of literature assessing feminism in Taiwan's rapidly shifting political geography. Over the past 30 to 40 years, scholars have traced how feminism in Taiwan navigates inherited systems and categories, deeply influenced by ancient Chinese thought, particularly Confucian ideals that continue to inform gender and family roles. In one interpretation of the last two decades, researchers such as Hwei-syin Lu begin by describing Taiwanese feminism as fundamentally shaped by these persistent patriarchal institutions, which continue to define women primarily in relation to male figures and domestic expectations.[17] While aligned with this thread of thought, the analysis extends it by examining how certain marginalized figures, namely the Buddhist nun and sex worker, challenge this framework. Rather than fitting neatly into the dominant narrative of feminist progress in Taiwan, these women expose its limitations and

[12] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 1-3, 5, 8.
[13] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 146-153.
[14] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 146-153.
[15] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 146-153.
[16] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 146-153.
[17] Lu, "Transcribing Feminism," 224-229.

offer alternative models for rethinking feminist agency and visibility outside of traditional familial or marital roles. By existing and acting on the peripheries, they prompt a reconsideration of what counts as feminist resistance in Taiwan, pushing the discourse to include more diverse and contradictory forms of womanhood. Centering nuns and sex workers in this way complicates prevailing assumptions about Taiwanese feminism and draws attention to the ways in which women's roles remain constrained by historical expectations.

Defining Marginality: Buddhist Nuns and Sex Workers

The social position of the nun began in the fourth century and expanded to include around 120,000 clerics in China, half of whom were women, by 800 CE. David C. Schak traces the history of nunnery, exploring Buddhism's popularity throughout the Tang and Song dynasties, followed by a decline in status with the rise of Neo-Confucianism.[18] Tracing this decline in Buddhism's popularity to modern-day Taiwan, Hillary Crane provides details on the negative, widespread impressions Taiwanese citizens hold against Buddhist nuns, stemming from the idea of one turning to Buddhism only when other aspects of their lives have failed.[19] Despite a lack of acceptance, Chengpang Lee and Ling Han explain that increasing numbers of women are joining Buddhism and actively taking leadership roles.[20] Moreover, many Buddhist nuns are also advocating for gender equality within Buddhist practices and social change in the broader society.[21] According to David C. Schak, this includes many women who are well-educated with potential for highly prosperous lives.[22]

When considering the sex worker, the history becomes even fuzzier insofar as the position of the sex workers evolves across history, with traces beginning in the second century, with concubinage in ancient China's Han dynasty. Focusing on Taiwan's legal history in relation to sex work, Mei-Hua Chen unpacks the timeline in which sex work was evident under Chinese rule prior to 1895, became institutionally licensed under Japanese colonizers from 1895 to 1945, and then was immediately abolished upon Chiang Kai-shek's rise to power after WWII.[23] Though initially abolished to disassociate with "immoral" practices of Japanese colonizers, abolition simply made sex work an underground industry that

[18] Schak, "Gender and Buddhism in Taiwan," 151.
[19] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 1-3, 7-8.
[20] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 58-60.
[21] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 66-71.
[22] Schak, "Gender and Buddhism in Taiwan," 161.
[23] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.

could not adequately control STDs. As a result, in 1956, the Act of Management of Prostitution in Taiwan Province was passed, which ultimately shifted Taiwan back to employing licensed sex workers.[24] However, in 1997, Taipei's city mayor abolished Taipei-licensed prostitution, which led to debates around sex work that failed to make any policy changes. Currently, sex work is technically legal only in designated areas, but no such areas exist.[25] Given the lack of structure associated with sex work, Josephine Chuen-Juei Ho argues that it varies greatly from woman to woman in terms of motivations, business practices, and boundaries, for example.[26]

Despite their vastly different social functions, both Buddhist nuns and sex workers in Taiwan reveal how women's roles are conditionally accepted based on their perceived contribution to society and the family. Buddhist nuns were largely tolerated because of their detachment from active societal roles and their association with virtue. Sex workers, however, were regulated or ignored depending on changing moral discourses. Regardless of their distinct paths, both were ultimately marginalized. Their legitimacy hinges not on their inherent personhood but on how their existence aligns with broader state and cultural interests. This conditional acceptance reveals the deeper gendered dynamics at play, setting the stage for an examination of their ambiguous legal and political positioning throughout Taiwan's history.

Legal and National Dimensions of Acceptance

Despite operating in vastly different contexts, Buddhist nuns and sex workers in Taiwan occupy similarly unstable positions in the legal and social order, and are only granted legitimacy and stability when their existence serves broader national interests. Given that the general political space for women in Taiwanese society heavily emphasizes family relations and filial piety, women who do not partake in marriage and reproduction are often socially outcast from the traditional societal network. Buddhist nuns and sex workers, while seemingly very different, both inhabit a space situated somewhat outside of the general political sphere that governs Taiwan. In this context, "being outside" refers to how these women are accepted by the law according to national interests, yet even when they are legally protected, they are still not treated well or with the same status as traditionally defined women.

[24] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.
[25] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145-146.
[26] Josephine Chuen-Juei Ho, "Self-Empowerment and 'Professionalism': Conversations with Taiwanese Sex Workers," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (December 2, 2010): 283–295, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370050141159.

Sex Work's Shifting Legal Status

Throughout Taiwanese history, sex work has had an unstable position in the law, shifting between different degrees of tolerance. Here, "unstable" refers to the fact that sex work in Taiwan is only ever considered in relation to the nation, such that, as an industry, it has no grounding of its own. Firstly, sex work is unstable in the sense that laws regulating or forbidding it change frequently. Licensed sex work was reintroduced in 1956, then fully abolished just a little over 40 years later, before being placed back in the semilegal realm a little over a decade after that.[27] Its legal instability is also attributed to how sex work emerges in the law, namely, how it is often treated as "unthinkable," in terms of political invisibility and institutional neglect. That is, it is an issue not in need of serious thought, unless some other benefit is associated, such as a diplomatic advantage or national image. The unthinkable nature of sex work in Taiwan's legal realm is shown through how it was consistently thought of through the lens of national interests, instead of as an industry or labor-related issue in and of itself. In this context, "unthinkable" refers to the suppression of sex work's recognition as legitimate labor, where it is denied the basic considerations of regulation, worker protection, and policy infrastructure unless it becomes temporarily useful to the state. Since sex work was not seen as its own category and attended to as such, it was subject to instability following trends in Taiwanese culture, and its regulation was grounded in overarching political and societal agendas rather than the individual needs and rights of sex workers. Essentially, thinking about sex work from a political and societal standpoint was conveniently swept to the side unless it had to be considered in terms of national interest. Generally, the instability of sex work followed broader trends of Taiwanese culture, society, and nationalism.

Prior to the establishment of Taiwan, sex work was illegal throughout China's last imperial dynasty, from 1644 to 1911, the Qing Dynasty. However, when Taiwan was under Chinese rule, prior to 1895, sex work was evident.[28] Then, Japanese colonizers, in power from 1895 to 1945, wanting to comply with their army's sexual desires while carefully controlling STDs, formally instituted licensed sex work.[29]

Once Taiwan was taken over by the Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese nationalists, in 1949, the pattern of sex work shifting between different levels of legality officially began. With the KMT, sex work was

[27] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.
[28] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.
[29] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.

promptly abolished under the notion that it was an "immoral" practice associated with the Japanese colonizers.[30] At the same time, given that the KMT had just lost the Chinese Civil War to the Communists, they were committed to transforming Taiwan into a "Free China" that was competing with the Chinese Communists over the notion of China, politically and culturally, as opposed to simply being a Japanese colony.[31] As a result, Taiwanese authorities deemed it a priority to strengthen the sense of national identity as well as national power, with increasing international support as one of their main concerns.[32] Increased concerns around national identity during this period influenced the location of sex work in the law. After all, there was the notion that Taiwan, as a nation, should not be built upon practices like sex work that were internationally seen as immoral and unrespectable.

While sex work was initially criminalized as part of Taiwan's effort to distinguish itself from Japan in terms of national development, enforcement of these laws later diminished as sex work became crucial for securing US support for Taiwanese independence. Specifically, Taiwan's nationalistic aspirations included promoting tourism, given its potential to help them advertise their political and economic achievements, increase foreign exchange, and gain support from other nations. The interests of Taiwan's government at the time then aligned naturally with America's military interests, wanting to provide tourism opportunities for soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War.[33] Specifically, the US actively instituted the R&R (Rest and Recuperation) programs meant to help soldiers decompress and maintain their combat strength, which included sexual service, among other forms of mental and physical relaxation. However, given that military rules forbade American soldiers from visiting brothels, they found most of their sexual partners in bars.[34] As a result, the number of bar girls in Taiwan dramatically increased, accommodating the estimated 190,390 Americans who visited Taiwan between 1965 and 1970.[35] Sex tourism in this context directly resulted from the Taiwanese government figures cooperating with such arrangements for the purpose of improving national interests.

As sex tourism in Taiwan progressed, it became more evident that sex work corresponded to the desire of the nation. Specifically, at

[30] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145.
[31] Jill Yen, "The Body Matters: Nationalism and American Sex Tourism in Postcolonial Taiwan," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4 (2014): 777-778 (New York: Addleton Academic Publishers).
[32] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[33] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[34] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[35] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.

this point in history, the nation became stronger if American soldiers were fulfilled, given that it appeased America as a whole. As a result, when America started showing concerns about hygienic conditions and the potential of diseases carried by sex workers spreading to their soldiers, Taiwanese officials complied by working to ease said concerns. In working to prevent American soldiers from catching STDs, American authorities requested that medical intervention for sex workers be officially instituted.[36] In 1969, the KMT established an STD control center in Taipei, under the direction of American and WHO specialists. Also, under the authorization of American and WHO experts, inspection groups organized by the Health Bureau of Taipei City patrolled bars. These inspection groups checked the health certificates of bar girls, tracked suspected patients, and reported regularly to a joint group of Taiwanese and American representatives.[37] For a period of time, even after American soldiers stopped traveling to Taiwan, joint supervision of bar girls remained.[38] This supervision speaks toward secondary agencies, such as the WHO, becoming legal entities in Taiwan, thus furthering the potential for legal control of sex workers. Additionally, it is important to note that with concerns around STDs, essentially all focus was placed on the sex worker, as opposed to any of the American soldiers, relating back to the unstable legal position of sex workers that stems from their penalization being determined in relation to national interest.

For Taiwan, approving American sex tourism was a practical means of sustaining its relations with its most significant ally. America was the main power assisting in improving the strength and legitimacy of Taiwan in its struggle with the Chinese communists. Looking broadly at Taiwan's timeline of colonization and rule, breaking from Japan and then China, there are parallels to be drawn with how sex work was framed legally during each of these transitions. Namely, detaching from Japan came with taking specific steps away from sex work, while separating from China resulted in a deliberate revival of legalized sex work.

Nevertheless, while officials largely espoused favorable views toward American sex tourism in Taiwan, a nationalistic apprehension concerning its ramifications for women and society gained increasing salience. Essentially, there were conflicts of how sex work was aligned with national interest, along with a certain limit to how far Taiwan could align with America and how much it had to distinguish itself to form its own identity. Namely, the "foreign" fashion and behavior of bar girls were often criticized as indecent and a violation of cultural boundaries.

[36] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[37] Yen, "The Body Matters," 783-784.
[38] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.

Bar girls were openly condemned for their thoughtlessness toward cultural identity, apparently harming traditional Chinese ethics and social norms through their adoption of Western styles, public displays of affection toward American soldiers, and sexualized behavior.[39] Further, bar girls' desire to act like or even try to become foreigners was judged harshly, being seen as a violation of Chinese womanhood under Confucian values, which promoted private and restrained expressions of the body.[40] Amidst such concerns, it is crucial to understand that government officials avoided directly criticizing the sex trade between Taiwanese women and American soldiers. Instead, their censure was directed toward the women themselves and their conduct. The prioritization of criminalizing the performance of sex workers over the act of sex work itself allowed for male clients to be largely disassociated from the transaction, thereby shifting negative societal associations exclusively onto the women. Structurally, this resulted in sex workers frequently facing fines or imprisonment for providing services, while men who engaged their services did not endure comparable repercussions.[41] Laws then responded to this reality by more heavily penalizing and monitoring sex workers, while male clients were generally kept out of the state's concerns. This highlights how the perceived threat stems not from sex work broadly, but from the gendered nature of female sex work. After all, women are not allowed to step out of the family the same way a man is, given that their identity is traditionally meant to be defined in relation to the family. Further, Taiwanese society expects to have a certain level of control over women, which is not expected for men, and they lack this control over sex workers, which is viewed as disruptive.

By 1997, sex work's legal position shifted once more, again in relation to national interests, displaying how legal attention on sex work was deemphasized when its relevance to other national interests is minimal. Specifically, Taipei's city mayor at the time, Chen Shui-bian, abolished Taipei-licensed sex work, arguing that it created a negative image for the state. As a result of Chen Shui-bian's ban, 128 licensed sex workers campaigned together for their right to work. Despite this, arguments for the rights of sex workers were unsuccessful, failing to impact policy decisions.[42] It was only in 2009 that two judges filed a constitutional litigation to the Constitutional Court stating that punishing sex workers while not doing the same for clients violated equal protection guaranteed by the Constitution. In the same year, the

[39] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[40] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.
[41] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145-146, 151.
[42] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145-146, 151.

Constitutional Court issued the Judicial Interpretation of No. 666, which overturned Section 1 of Article 80 of the Social Order Maintenance Act (SOM), previously stating that women providing unlicensed sex work could be jailed for three days.[43] With this decision, the Constitutional Court also gave two years to come up with new legislation. Passed in 2011, the revised SOM stated that anyone who engaged in a sexual transaction could be fined up to NT$30,000, except for transactions that took place in certain sex districts meant to be designated by local governments. While this technically legalized sex work in 2011, no specific zones have been issued since then.[44] With this, Taiwanese politicians have been able to address sex work to the extent that it *needed* to be addressed, but, beyond that, simply not deal with it. This current reality ties into the unthinkable aspect of sex work in the law and how it is pushed to the sidelines when its consideration does not relate to other national interests. While sex work may have been a somewhat stable position at certain points in Taiwanese history, this stability has been inconsistent. Additionally, the legality of sex work currently resides in a grey area in which issues have not been clearly addressed by government officials.

Buddhist Nuns and National Interests: A Different Instability

When exploring how Buddhist nuns have historically interacted with Taiwan's legal system, they also fit with the narrative of instability and being tied to national interest. This stems from changing levels of acceptance within Buddhism for women as well as the extent to which Buddhist nuns' actions have aligned with the interests of Taiwan's government. Nuns experienced a quieter instability marked by delayed recognition and conditional legal inclusion, unlike sex workers, whose status shifted through repeated criminalization and regulation. Thus, their legal oppression, so to speak, did not take the form of prohibition but omission.

Prior to 1952, just three years after the takeover of the Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese nationalists, most women were not formally ordained as Buddhists. Instead, they practiced what was called *zhaijiao*, directly translating to "vegetarian religion," and lacked legal protections that were granted to ordained monastics.[45] However, in

[43] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145-146, 151.
[44] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 145-146, 151.
[45] Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns: Activism in Taiwan and North America," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 463, https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/13/.

1952, Taiwan had its first formal ordination ceremony for nuns.[46] The initiative was supported by the KMT's desire to build Taiwan's identity on traditional Chinese values, with Buddhism serving as appropriately representative. The first formal ordination signified an important change in the legal status of Buddhist nuns, given that they transitioned from not being officially recognized by the nation to having a more established presence. Ultimately, they built autonomous institutions that earned legal protection and public legitimacy by contributing to state-aligned social goals.

In the specific context of national interest, Buddhist nuns generally operated in accordance with the Taiwanese government's agendas on various fronts, such as social welfare and building connections internationally. In terms of social welfare, nuns, both historically and currently, have contributed to supporting the poor, running kindergartens and other youth organizations, operating care facilities for the elderly, helping out those who are disabled, protecting stray animals, providing disaster relief, especially after earthquakes and typhoons, and more.[47] In terms of international connections, valued from the start of Taiwan's deliberate distancing from China till now, various Taiwanese Buddhist organizations have expanded to other countries. In one specific instance, Cheng Yen, ordained in 1963, founded the Tzu Chi Foundation, which ultimately expanded to have volunteers in 68 countries and provide support to 136 countries.[48] By way of Tzu Chu and other Buddhist organizations, Taiwan has not only been able to expand its presence in other countries but also improve the way they are perceived internationally, which, in turn, aligns with Taiwan's national interests.

Beyond service and international relations, Buddhist nuns have also aligned with broader national interests of preserving cultural heritage, dating back hundreds and even thousands of years. Introduced to China during the Han dynasty, spanning from 206 BCE to 220 CE, Buddhism was one of the systems that helped Taiwan reestablish itself in competition with the Communists in China after the KMT lost the Chinese Civil War. After the Civil War, Taiwan was competing with China over the notion of "being Chinese," with upholding cultural values as a central focus.[49] The work of those in Buddhist monasteries thus naturally paralleled many of Taiwan's nationalistic interests.

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[46] Tsomo, "Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns," 463.
[47] Tsomo, "Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns," 461-472.
[48] Tzu Chi Foundation, *Tzu Chi Global Website*, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.tzuchi.org/.
[49] Yen, "The Body Matters," 777-778.

Given that the actions of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan largely aligned with national interests, and they were viewed neutrally, if not positively, by international bodies, they were generally kept out of the focus of the law and any sort of criminalization. Over time, they were granted legal legitimacy by aligning with state values, which made them subjects of legal recognition rather than legal suspicion.

Conditional Legitimacy and State Control

While mainly being external to consistent legal focus is a shared reality for sex workers and Buddhist nuns alike, for nuns, it was a result of their lack of apparent disruption, as opposed to sex workers, who were often seen as an issue, even while they were serving national interests. Generally, the objections against both Buddhist nuns and sex workers, along with the way they were somewhat barred from Taiwanese society, stemmed from informal sectors, such as the family or overarching societal impressions, as opposed to formal legal control.

Familial and Societal Perceptions

While both Buddhist nuns and sex workers disrupt traditional family and social structures, sex workers are judged more harshly than Buddhist nuns due to their physical proximity to the families from which they come. After all, this disparity stems from their physical proximity to their families, which directly implicates their families in negative societal perceptions.

Challenging Family and Gender Norms

Zooming out, in the context of family norms and social codes, both Buddhist nuns and sex workers are regarded as deviant and socially disapproved, given that both groups, whether consciously or not, oppose traditional Taiwanese norms of family and womanhood. The norms they oppose include the continuation of the bloodline and compliance with traditionally unpaid women's labor, such as homemaking, reproduction, and engaging in intercourse with their husbands.

Specifically, by leaving home without producing any heirs or providing any financial support, the mere action of Buddhist nuns joining the monastery defies family expectations and is met with societal disapproval in Taiwan. Beyond this, by not following the traditional life trajectory of marrying, having children, and taking care of a household, Buddhist nuns fail to fulfill traditional standards of womanhood.

There is a degree of strategy to this approach by nuns, which is to say that their decision to leave is sometimes explicitly predicated on leaving the family and circumventing what is traditionally expected of them. For example, when asked about why she joined the nunnery, Chuan Ming responded by saying, "On my second meditation retreat, I first thought of becoming a nun. I knew I wanted to live a very different life, different from what I'd begun to live. I didn't want to live like my mother because I think she is very unhappy. I didn't want to go the same way. I thought if I became a nun, then I could be a teacher and reach out to people with hard lives like my mother. I can teach them how to live a very different kind of life."[50] Given the inflexibility in the lives of many Taiwanese women due to obligations to both their natal families and their husbands, Buddhism is sometimes viewed as an alternative that can help women remove themselves from roles associated with the patriarchy while still leading a fulfilling life. The perception of Buddhist nuns as less problematic stems from their greater proximity and detachment from the family unit, rendering them a distant rather than imminent threat. Consequently, their relative absence in Taiwanese society contributes to a reduction in public scrutiny. It is primarily when Buddhist nuns try to reenter the public sphere via activism, for example, that they are suddenly considered with more thought, and their presence is magnified. Yet, even in these cases, their public presence, focusing primarily on humanitarian acts such as disaster relief, aligns with national interests and international approval. In many cases, the reentry of Buddhist nuns is met with respect, such as when Chao-hwei, founder of the Hongsh Buddhist Theological School in 1986, publicly denounced the Eight Special Rules that have restricted the autonomy of nuns in Buddhist practices.[51] Given that the Eight Special Rules had become a means by which monks asserted superiority over nuns, Chao-hwei's rejection of them gained general support from Taiwanese society.[52]

When thinking about how parents respond to a daughter's decision to join the nunnery, the reality that the family name and lineage are carried by men is important to consider. In fact, anthropologist Hillary Crane has noted that many Taiwanese Buddhists she interviewed stated that the reason nuns outnumbered monks was due to the decreased severity of women becoming Buddhists, given their lesser centrality to the continuation of the family.[53] Despite this, parents usually still seem to take issue with their daughters becoming Buddhist nuns. Part of this stems from the traditional belief that unmarried daughters

[50] Crane, "Resisting Marriage and Renouncing Womanhood," 13.
[51] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 67-69.
[52] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 64-66.
[53] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 9-10.

will haunt their natal families after death.[54] Steven Harrell, an anthropologist at the University of Washington, elaborates on this belief:

> "[a] girl who dies unmarried cannot have a place as an ancestor on her father's altar. Her family can worship her in some back room somewhere, or donate her spirit table to a Buddhist 'vegetarian hall,' but in some cases they choose to find a husband for her, marrying her to a living man in a posthumous wedding … and having her spirit tablet enshrined on her husband's family's ancestral altar. In this way, a dangerous ghost, an anomaly in the family system, has been domesticated by placing her posthumously in the normal structural position of a wife and, at least for purposes of ancestor worship, a mother."[55]

The lengths to which families will go to avert the perceived harm an unmarried daughter can bring highlight that a daughter remaining unmarried, irrespective of circumstance, is heavily disapproved of. Beyond this, the lack of proximity between Buddhist nuns and their families is often an intentional choice, a strategy employed to avoid the demanding and rigid expectations traditionally placed on women.

Joining the nunnery disrupts filial piety, given that it essentially results in the abandonment of parental needs and expectations. Sex workers, on the other hand, can be seen as supporting Taiwanese traditions of children taking care of their parents throughout their adult lives. Though they breach social norms, sex workers often fit into the archetype of "filial daughters" and use sex work as a means to provide for their families.[56] In contrast, Buddhist nuns rarely provide for their families at all. In some cases, these sex workers are not only providing for their parents but also their brothers, given that Taiwanese women are subject to a double hierarchy where, as children, they are expected to obey parental authority, but also, as women, they are victims of the patriarchy.[57] In one instance, sex worker Shu-lian, age 41, spoke about her experience as a sex worker:

> My mum extremely privileges boys and condemns girls … She sold me to the brothel. She gave money to my elder brother to run small businesses. But his businesses always

[54] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 9-10.
[55] Han and Lee, "Mothers and Moral Activists," 9-10.
[56] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 148.
[57] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 148.

> failed and ended up with huge debts. I paid for his and my sister's wedding. I paid for my father's funeral, and the renovation of our house. I almost paid for everything, but I didn't complain about it.[58]

Additionally, Charles H. McCaghy (Bowling Green State University) and Charles Hou (National Chung-Hsing University) collected personal anecdotes from 89 Taiwanese sex workers between the ages of 16 and 49.[59] Of these 89 women, 34 percent stated that they initially started sex work to support their parents financially, and the following are the accounts of 3 out of those 30 women.[60] In these instances, sex workers are actually the breadwinners of their families. Yet, they do not receive any of the power or respect that traditionally accompanies the family's breadwinner.[61]

The Proximity of Stigma: Sex Workers vs. Nuns

If sex workers often support their families quite tangibly, whereas Buddhist nuns do not, it raises the question of why sex workers are viewed in a significantly more negative light. Beyond international values, namely from America, that idealize Buddhism while condemning sex work, the idea of proximity and household structure is key. Though often indispensable to their families, sex workers are simultaneously viewed as a destabilizing force within them. There's the notion that sex workers will form romantic relationships with married men, thus tearing apart marriages and leaving children as victims of divorce, which is an extension of Taiwanese fears around sex work's potential to damage traditional family structures.[62] This fear is reinforced by stories in the media that portray relationships between married men and sex workers.[63] Given fears around sex workers' potential impact on Taiwanese society and opinions that their work is immoral or improper, families do not want others to feel as though they are connected to something perceived as shameful and thus destructive.

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[58] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 148.
[59]Charles H. McCaghy and Charles Hou, "Family Affiliation and Prostitution in a Cultural Context: Career Onsets of Taiwanese Prostitutes," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 23, no. 3 (June 1994): 257–259.
[60] McCaghy and Hou, "Family Affiliation and Prostitution," 257-259.
[61] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 148.
[62] Chen, "The Social Organisation of Sex Work in Taiwan," 146-153.
[63] For example, there is a story of a couple that drowned themselves together in the Tainan Canal that has appeared in many Taiwanese novels and operas, as well as two 1950s feature films as discussed by Cheung in "Taiwan in Time: Mother to the Alienated."

However, when the family is financially relying on them, they are bound to be "close" in proximity. Oftentimes, sex workers live at home; even if not, the money they provide is still in the house and serves as a constant reminder of the family's association with money that came from what is viewed as immoral and illegal practices. Given that families do not want to associate with sex work in any way to maintain their own reputations, the sex worker is shunned even while being heavily relied on. Additionally, this perceived problem with sex workers stems from a gendered function, in which society, specifically male members of society, want to and expect to be able to control women. However, sex workers, with sexual agency, autonomy over their own bodies, and the ability to rely on themselves financially, are not controlled in a traditional manner, which feels threatening for many.

From an overarching standpoint, Buddhist nuns and sex workers carry a cultural stigmatization that they then reflect onto the family they are a part of. This is not to say that these forms of disruption are deliberate, but that their very existence stands against the dominant vision of the family. Despite this underlying similarity, sex workers are despised more than Buddhist nuns, not only because they perform sex for money but also because they are deeply in proximity to the family and fail to comply with traditional gender functions.

Conclusion

Taiwanese society's conditional treatment of Buddhist nuns and sex workers, contingent on their ability to benefit the nation, is an ongoing practice that ties these women's legitimacy to nationalistic and economic agendas. Through this dynamic, women's forced construction of identity in relation to men and the patriarchal society continues, even if becoming increasingly less apparent. Even in recent years, as the environment of Taiwan's economy, politics, and nationalism, as well as the realities of Buddhist nuns and sex workers, have continued to change, similar underlying perceptions and treatment can be observed.

While daughters joining the Buddhist nunnery is still unaligned with traditional values of family and filial piety, Buddhist nuns have increasingly participated in the public sphere and are increasingly accepted, given their alignment with national interests. Namely, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, founded by Buddhist nun Cheng Yen in 1966, has become a prominent humanitarian organization both within Taiwan and internationally. In terms of their recent contributions to Taiwanese well-being, they ordered and donated 15 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to the

government along with the Hon Hai Precision Co-affiliated Yonglin Foundation and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC).[64] Later, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen posted on her Facebook, stating that she thanked Cheng Yen via video conference for her foundation's efforts in helping the country navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.[65] The efforts of Cheng Yen and other Buddhist nuns have become increasingly mainstream in Taiwanese society, as well as the rest of the world, and are generally met with respect and gratitude.

In contrast, sex workers remain peripheral to mainstream notions of national progress, and legal consideration for their status has been limited, given that they play no notable role in supporting contemporary national interests. While the bulk of sex workers' modern activism took place between 1997 and 2006, there have still been isolated moments of increased visibility. Namely, in December of 2023, as reported by Taipei Times, the Chiayi City Council "passed a motion yesterday to assess the viability of establishing a regulated red-light district."[66] This proposal to consider establishing a regulated red-light district was set forward by Chiayi City Councilor Molly Yen, who argued that banning sex work makes it harder for sex workers to get labor insurance and also results in discrimination. Further, the proposal stated that a ban on sex work results in decreased information on the health of sex workers and that there are red light districts abroad contributing to the success of tourism.[67] In another instance, Taiwanese pop singer Hsieh Ho-hsien ran for a seat on the Taipei City Council in 2022 and called for the legalization of sex work, along with marijuana and modified vehicles on city streets.[68]

While there are specific individuals advocating on behalf of sex workers, Taiwan's last legal brothel in Taoyuan City's Taoyuan District

[64] "Moderna Vaccine Shipment Due to Arrive Early Today," *Taipei Times*, October 8, 2021, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2021/10/09/2003765796.
[65] Chun-chi Wang and Jake Chung, "Covid-19: Tsai Thanks Tzu Chi for Vaccine Effort," *Taipei Times*, June 26, 2021, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2021/06/27/2003759888.
[66] Wei-chieh Ting and Jake Chung, "Chiayi City Red-Light District Motion Passes," *Taipei Times*, December 5, 2023, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/12/06/2003810212.
[67] Duncan DeAeth, "Councilor in South Taiwan Lobbies for Legal Sex Work Zone," *Taiwan News*, May 19, 2023, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4896619.
[68] Matthew Strong, "Taiwan Pop Singer Disqualified from Running in City Council Election," *Taiwan News*, October 14, 2022, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4686813.

shut down in June of 2022.[69] In part, this stems from a decline in clients who are choosing to pursue illegal sex work instead.[70] When it comes to illegal sex work, the police and government are continuing to catch and persecute sex workers, many of whom were immigrants from China, Thailand, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, sometimes entering the country by way of illegitimate marriages or overstaying visas.[71] In response, stricter immigration laws have been put in place to prevent women from immigrating in order to become a part of Taiwan's sex industry.[72]

This contrast highlights how conditional legitimacy continues to operate along lines of perceived social value and national alignment. While Buddhist nuns, especially through the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, have gained increasing respect and recognition both within Taiwan and internationally, sex workers continue to face many challenges, from criminalization to stigmatization. These patterns suggest that the cultural and legal inclusion of women outside traditional familial roles remains contingent on how closely their labor aligns with state-defined ideals. As the cultural, legal, and economic components of Taiwan continue to evolve, future research might examine how shifting societal needs reshape the visibility and legitimacy of different marginalized groups.

[69] Keoni Everington, "Taiwan's Last Legal Brothel Closes Its Doors," *Taiwan News*, June 8, 2022, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4563678.
[70] "Taiwan's Last Legal Brothel Shuts Doors, Police Say," *Taipei Times*, June 8, 2022, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2022/06/09/2003779609.
[71] Duncan DeAeth, "Police in South Taiwan Arrest 12 Vietnamese in Brothel Bust," *Taiwan News*, June 24, 2023, https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4927536.; "Alleged Sex Workers Arrested for Overstaying Visas," *Taipei Times*, January 18, 2019, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/01/19/2003708232.
[72] "NIA Cracking down on Use of Visa-Free Access for Prostitution," *Focus Taiwan – CNA English News*, October 16, 2017, https://focustaiwan.tw/society/201710160013.

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