# The Oriental Nun and Representation of Buddhist Female Monastics or Monasticism
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Simon Fraser University

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On June 3, 2019 I had a chance to sit down with Elizabeth Guthrie, PhD Candidate at the University of Waterloo, to chat about her conference paper at the University of British Columbia. Titled "Jane Iwamura's Virtual Orientalism and the Oriental "Nun,"" the paper is presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion (CSSR) panel "Religion and Gender: Gendering the Oriental Monk, The Heroin's Journey as Transformative, and Women Contributions to Understanding Cultural Pluralism" at Congress 2019.

Figure 1. Elizabeth Guthrie. Photo by Ngoc B. Le. Reprinted with permission

Guthrie's conference paper engages with Jane Iwamura's thesis of virtual orientalism—a critique of Western representation of Asian religions via examination of three popular figures in American popular culture: D. T. Suzuki, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and character Kwai Chang Caine of the television series *Kung Fu*.[1] Iwamura argues that Americans' understanding of Asian religions is shaped by their familiarity with a network of mediated homogenous representations of Asian religious figures which can be described under "the icon of the *Oriental Monk.*"[2] In these representations, the religious figures are presented to conform to the Oriental Monk icon's characteristics of being spiritually committed, having a calm manner, wearing Asian face, dressing in a particular way, and often being male. This form of representation differs from Edward

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[1] Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*.

[2] Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 6.

Said's conceptualization of Orientalism via literary imagination, as it is deployed mainly via photography, film, television, and other electronic media. Termed "Virtual Orientalism," the network of representation determines and reinforces the images of the Asian religious Other in American psyche via culturally stereotypical visual forms of media.

The Oriental Monk icon was initially developed based on both literary imagination of Asian religions via early Transcendentalists' works and Rudyard Kipling's *Jewel in the Crown*, and images in popular nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers. Specifically, Iwamura argues that the images of religious scholars at the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions in the *Chicago Tribune*, which downplayed physiological differences in favor of highlighting likeliness among participants, establish the tone of American media's construction of the Oriental Monk icon in the twentieth century. The shift to more positive yet racially different representation of Asian religions via the Oriental Monk figure in the early twentieth century can also be found in movies like D. W. Friffith's *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl* (1919) and popular characters such as Chinese detective Charlie Chan in the 1920s and 30s.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Oriental Monk icon reflects a complex intersection between Orientalist perception of Asian religions and Western disillusion with institutionalized Christianity, which gives birth to a religiously and racially hierarchical narrative of America's engagement with non-Christian religions. In this culturally patriarchal narrative, the Oriental Monk figure is presented to mentor and pass Oriental wisdom and spiritual insight to a marginalized orphan white boy to salvage the West from any forms of threat, ranging from capitalism, or totalitarian rule, to spiritless technology. Thus, the Orien-

tal Monk plays the role of an "ideological caregiver"[3] to dominant white Americans, who in return assume the role of protectors of Asian religions and culture, with inherited authority to define the traditions.

It is within the context of Virtual Orientalism and the Oriental Monk icon that the twentieth-century American representations of D. T. Suzuki work. Mediated images of D. T. Suzuki become an icon through which the American public understands Zen Buddhism. Iwamura argues that the 1950s visual and written portrayals of Suzuki, as a friendly venerable Eastern sage, align with American pre-conceptions of Asian religions and culture as mysterious and with the generally positive post-war cultural reception of Japan. The narrative of the Oriental Monk and his disciple is also visible in the popular press, which shifted attention from D. T. Suzuki to his perceived Western "disciples" such as Alan Watts—understood as the West's authorities on Zen Buddhism. With his portrayal as a wise gentle sage, Suzuki's representation fits the role of the Oriental Monk, while a figure like Alan Watts constitutes the role of the protector of the spiritual tradition. The narrative myth of the wise Asian sage transferring knowledge and authority to his Anglo pupil is justified via further construction of Zen Buddhism as a dying static religion in Japan which receives little appreciation form its Asian masses corrupted by Western influence. Thus, Zen Buddhism is conceptualized as being permanently stuck in the past, unable regenerate except in the new religious center that is America.

So how does Guthrie's model of the Oriental Nun extend the discussion of Western representation of Asian religions? With humor and clarity, she explains it in the interview below.

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[3] Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 62.

Interview

**Ngoc Le (NL):** Thank you for the interview opportunity. Can you share a little bit about yourself and your research interests?

**Elizabeth Guthrie (EG):** I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo and I'm working with Dr. Jeff Wilson. My particular area of research is on contemporary Chinese Buddhism in Canada. I'm looking at how communities build sacred spaces and places, and how these different temples and monasteries, for example, are received by the greater public, how they are used by the public, or whether they are used by the public. I'm doing a particular key study of a group of Chinese Buddhist temples in Ontario who have different locations throughout Ontario, including Toronto. They are in the process of replicating and building a very large monastery just outside of the Peterborough area. Since my main interest is in the replication of sacred space, I'm studying how they're using historical architecture models from China to build this monastery as part of that process.

**NL:** How does your conference paper on Jane Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism* and the Oriental Nun relate to your PhD project?

**EG:** In many ways, it doesn't. [Laugh]. It's kind of an interesting thing. I read Jane Iwamura's book for my field comprehensive exam and think that it offers a very different way of conceptualizing and analyzing how Asian religions are presented in North America, how these images do affect us, and how people see images of the Oriental Monk and they just don't really think about it. So, the book's thesis has been at the back of my head. But when I was reading her book, I found that there isn't a discussion of female monastics and I happened to read a few other readings

about gender dynamics within Buddhism at the same time, so all of these things just came together and eventually created this paper. But it's definitely not directly related to the building of sacred space. It's kind of off-kilter so to speak, but I like to pursue things even when they are out of my comfort zone.

**NL**: Do you think the lack of discussion of female monastics' representation has to do with a lack of gender language in Buddhist doctrine and philosophy?

**EG**: I think it has less to do with language and more with the tension between Buddhist philosophy and social reality. You have this idea of impermanence, that nothing is permanent, don't focus on the self, there is no self, everything goes through the cycle of *saṃsāra*, things change, we are all changing, and everybody will eventually become male and female and other beings. But this is philosophical doctrine working toward enlightenment. The reality is that people live in society that focuses on and discriminates based on gender representations. One example in Buddhist monasticism is that Buddhist doctrine has placed more restrictions on women who are pursuing monasticism than men. Of course, monks have their own restrictions, but they do have more privileges than their nun counterparts.

**NL**: So, what are characteristics of the Oriental Nun? How does the representation model differ from Iwamura's Oriental Monk icon?

**EG**: In my presentation, I first describe Iwamura's Oriental Monk and Virtual Orientalism and how this icon creates a self-perpetuating cycle that obscures and minimizes the efforts of female religious leaders. My suggestion of the Oriental Nun as a counterpart to Iwamura's Oriental Monk is not just to create a female version of this icon, but rather to establish the Nun as an icon unto herself which is similarly a product and repre-

sentative of the influences of "Virtual Orientalism." Just as the Oriental Monk offers social commentary of North American culture and society and has unique characteristics that mark him as the icon, so too does the Nun. To that end, I highlighted three characteristics of the Oriental Nun model: monasticism, social engagement, and modernity.

By monasticism, I'm referring to the representation of Buddhist nuns as fully ordained monastics in contrast to the particular image of the Oriental Monk who is presented to look like a monastic but is actually not. In my analysis, I only focus on Iwamura's first model, D.T. Suzuki, for comparison since I focus on Buddhist nuns and real-life rather than imaginary figures. Certainly, D. T. Suzuki, in Iwamura's model, was an active practitioner, prolific scholar, teacher, and, as Iwamura states, a "popularizer of Zen in the West"[4] but he was not actually a monk even though he has been portrayed as a quasi-monastic in the broader popular culture framework of the Oriental Monk and Virtual Orientalism. My hypothetical Oriental Nun, in contrast, as found in pop-culture, is an ordained monastic. As I say in my paper, we see the Nun adhering to and living by Buddhist rules of monastic conduct as manifested through her actions: teaching Buddhism, personal daily practices, studying, and ethical discipline, including celibacy. Moreover, the icon of the Oriental Nun is recognizable by her outward appearance with her robes and shaved head. The Nun's choice of clothing and hairstyle (or lack thereof!), which are prescribed by her religious tradition, serve as visual cues of her renunciation and these either elicit respect from the lay community even as they elicit curiosity, admiration, scorn or abuse from outside. The Oriental Nun, unlike her male counterpart, is most definitely a monastic and all the trappings that implies.

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[4] Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 24.

I also extend the discussion to contrast the icon of the Oriental Nun with Scott Mitchell's "Tranquil Meditator." Mitchell describes the "Tranquil Meditator," an image found in advertising, film, print media, and television, as nearly always gendered female.[5] Unlike my Oriental Nun, however, Mitchell's icon is often overtly sexualized and depicted in solitude, meditating by herself. The icon, like the Oriental Monk, can't fully capture the distinct features of Buddhist nuns, specifically their monasticism and devotion to social engagement/activism and modernity.

Social engagement and activism are the second characteristics of my Oriental Nun and I suggest that they represent pressures and expectations placed on Buddhist female monastics by Western media. Unlike the Tranquil Meditator and the Oriental Monk, the Nun is most often depicted with others, whether fellow monastics or the public. It is not the solitary Nun who captures the attention of popular culture, but rather the group of nuns that stands out because of their collective actions to actualize Buddhist teachings of compassion to contribute to the betterment of society, either by being socially engaged or as activists. I offer one example of a real-life Buddhist nun who captures each aspect of this social engagement and activism: Venerable Zhengyan of the Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation. Venerable Zhengyan demonstrates how the icon of the Oriental Nun, as part of a larger community, strives to build a "pure land" in this world by donating to charity, running free medical clinics, providing disaster relief, and offering free education. In this case, the social engagement of the Nun is underscored. Alternatively, if the icon of the Oriental Monk as presented through D.T. Suzuki is "enigmatic," "soft spoken," "humorous," "charming," and "earnest," the Oriental Nun—in her communal efforts to relieve suffering and fight injustices,

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[5] Mitchell, "The Tranquil Meditator," 84.

including the ongoing issue of gender inequality, issues of ordination, and female leadership—is "forthright," "charismatic," "surprisingly active," and "not afraid of controversy."

And by modernity, I mean that the Buddhist nuns are often presented to be modern. This third characteristic is closely tied to the previous characteristics. The image of the Oriental Nun is based on the influences of "Virtual Orientalism," and thus Western modernity is essential to understand her representation. The Nun is not secondary to male monastics. Rather, she is depicted as being highly educated and having freedom of choice, including the choice to pursue monasticism. Moreover, the Oriental Nun is modern in that she is very capable of making use of "modernity." Not only does the image of the Oriental "Nun" spread through the paraphernalia of the modern world like technology and mass media, the Nun also relies on modern production materials and methods, increased frequency and ease of travel, improved medicine and education systems, and such, to better perform her social engagement and activism. Of course, all three characteristics that I highlight are interrelated and each aspect contrasts with the image of Suzuki as a representative of the Oriental Monk icon, in that Suzuki was seen as a sage of the ancient past whose wisdom can be passed to and adapted by the West for their own uses.

Oxymoronically, the fact that the nun is represented as fully ordained, socially engaged, and modern, I think these are pressures and desires, expectations, and stereotypes placed on Buddhist female monastics to get noticed in popular culture. Each characteristic is a stereotyped representation of female monastics that attempts to enact and justify depictions of "proper" female monasticism despite the emphasis on their agency. The icon of the Oriental Nun functions to exert boundaries around which types of female monastics' representation are "correct" and therefore worthy of attention, and which types are "incorrect" and

thus unworthy of attention. Thus, any monastic not fitting the image does not get noticed or does not "exist" in a sense. The underlying issue of Iwamura's Oriental Monk, Mitchell's Tranquil Meditator, and my hypothetical Nun, is that these representations are not incorrect per se, but they are imperfect. They serve to illuminate some aspects while shadowing others, and this undermines the fullness of Buddhism.



Figure 2. A snapshot of Guthrie's presentation. In the slide: the top-left photo is a headshot of Venerable Yvonne, The Great Wisdom Buddhist Institute in eastern Prince Edward Island. The bottom-right photo is D. T. Suzuki. Photo by Ngoc B. Le. Reprinted with permission

**NL:** To what extent are Buddhist female monastics able to exert their control and agency over their images in Western media?

**EG**: I believe that nuns, either in Asia or North America, are working to determine what their images ought to be, images that are diverse and varied instead of being confined to the model of the Oriental Nun. Though, the question is how much they have been able to fight against the mainstream representation as it seems to be an on-going power struggle.

**NL**: On a side note, do you think the Oriental Nun applies to fictional representation of Buddhist female monastics? I'm thinking of Tilda Swinton's role of a Tibetan monastic in *Doctor Strange*, who is presented to be very mystic and seems to have all the characteristics of the Oriental Monk icon.

**EG**: That's a really good point. I think the fictional character like one played by Tilda Swinton in Doctor Strange is sort of like a combination of characteristics of both the Oriental Monk and my hypothetical image of the Oriental Nun. I think I just need to do more research before I can say which one is which, and maybe there isn't.

**NL**: Thank you very much for the interview!

## Bibliography

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