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Amy Lee

The Open University of Hong Kong

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# The Autobiographical Self of a Buddhist Monk: Brief Analysis of Master Yin Shun's *An Ordinary Life*

Amy Lee

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

## **Abstract**

Autobiography, a self-written narrative normally documenting one's own life, seems to work on a concept of self that is contradictory to one of the core Buddhist beliefs: the "self" is an illusion. It is therefore interesting to examine and review an example of a Buddhist monk's autobiography, to analyze how the concept of the self is represented, and to further explore the role such a narrative is made to play in the context of contemporary Buddhist teachings. Master Yin Shun 印順 (1906-2005) was a well-known Chinese Buddhist scholar-monk. His advocating of

a socially engaged Buddhism also resulted in the establishment of Tzu-Chi Buddhist Foundation, an important charitable foundation based in Taiwan. Master Yin Shun's autobiography was written in three stages, marking three points of major illness in his life. His personal narrative was written in the form of an address to the readers and the direct sharing of Buddhist teachings while indirectly using his own life as an example of the manifestation of the dharma. The discussion will first set the background of Buddhist personal narratives starting from the early biographies of monks, to discuss the evolution of the role of such personal narratives in the context of Buddhism. Then Master Yin Shun's autobiography will be examined as an example of contemporary Buddhist autobiography, in order to understand how this new genre of writing serves as a skillful means to communicate the Buddha's teachings to readers.

## **Introduction: An Ordinary Life for Everyone**

While many people describe our world today as secularized, a world in which religions have been re-presented in a “down-to-earth” manner, biographies of “saints” in different religions are still very much part of the communication between the religious establishments and the lay population. Eminent monks in contemporary society are still upheld as role models of right behaviour, possessing relevant wisdom, and are diligent in religious practices in ways that encourage followers to behave and practice accordingly. Although the twenty-first-century world has a very different way of life, shaped very much by transformations in communications technology, the practice of publicizing eminent monks’ experiences and works as an important means to educate followers has kept up with the changing times. Founders of important Buddhist organizations such as Venerable Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1931-2009) of Dharma Drum Mountain,<sup>1</sup> Venerable Hsing Yun (Xing Yun 星雲) of Fo Guang Shan,<sup>2</sup> and Venerable

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<sup>1</sup> Venerable Sheng Yen (1931-2009) was a Chinese Buddhist scholar monk, and a Chan/Zen master. He was the founder of the Dharma Drum Mountain, an international Buddhist organization located in Jinshan, Taiwan. It participates actively in education, charity, and community engagement work in addition to being a religious organization.

<sup>2</sup> Venerable Hsing Yun (1927- ) founded Fo Guang Shan, a Buddhist order, in Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 1967. He is regarded as one of the most active advocates of Humanistic Buddhism in contemporary society. Fo Guang Shan is an international

Thich Nhat Hanh of Plum Village<sup>3</sup> have been well known to their lay communities, partly because of their skillful use of the media to publicize their life stories and work. In the globalized world today, sophisticated use of new media can engage potential followers in a personal way for effective teaching, as shown in a study of Venerable Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan.<sup>4</sup>

While biographies of eminent monks in the context of Chinese literature, from ancient to contemporary times, have undergone a change in terms of content and presentation, the primary goal of communicating Buddhist teachings has remained unchanged. A biography written in the third person has the benefit of distance, which may add objectivity and credibility to the narrative, thus strengthening the power to inspire and educate. Interestingly, another genre of life stories, the autobiography, can have a very different relationship with, and effect on, the readers. The autobiography, as an expressly personal story, written by the subject, appeared in Chinese literary history as recently as the twentieth century, although aspects of personal experiences had been present in other literary forms much earlier. The concept of the individual self, with a distinctly subjective voice, framing his or her own life-story in a certain way

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Chinese Mahayana Buddhist organization that practices Humanistic Buddhism, and is one of the largest charity organizations in Taiwan.

<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh (1926 - ) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, co-founder, with Buddhist nun Chân Không, of Plum Village Tradition in 1982 in southern France. He travelled internationally to promote peace and mindfulness, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. In November 2018, he returned to Vietnam to spend his remaining days there.

<sup>4</sup> Chia, "Toward a Modern Buddhist Hagiography," 141-65.

to share with readers, has a particularly interesting meaning in the context of Buddhist literature. How does a Buddhist monk make use of this very individualistic literary genre to deliver the Buddha's teaching, which has been generally understood to focus on selflessness and on no-self?

This article will examine the autobiography of Master Yin Shun, an important advocate of Humanistic Buddhism in modern times, to understand ways in which he used this personal narrative for the impersonal goal of delivering the teachings of the Buddha. The discussion will start with an overview of historical biographies of Buddhist monks in the Chinese literary context, to better understand how personal stories have served as a platform for spreading Buddhist teachings. Discussion of the formal aspects of the autobiography, and its relationship with the readers, will follow in order to highlight the unique possibilities of a monastic autobiography in teaching the dharma. Finally, space is reserved for examining and illustrating how Master Yin Shun used his autobiography, *An Ordinary Life*, (Pingfan de yisheng 平凡的一生) as a series of examples to illustrate key Buddhist concepts such as "causes and conditions" (*yinyuan* 因緣), and emptiness (*kong* 空). The article proposes that Master Yin Shun used the autobiography, which is traditionally a narrative used to construct the "self," and turned it into an expression of selflessness, true to the humanistic Buddhism he embraced.

### Historical Overview of Monastic Biographies as Buddhist Teaching

The monastic biography is a genre with a long tradition in China; its earliest examples can be traced back to the sixth century CE. *Mingseng zhuan* 名僧傳 (Biographies of famous monks), is believed to have been compiled by Baochang 寶唱 (ca. 466-518)<sup>5</sup> commencing in 510 CE. It was considered by many to be the earliest example of collected stories relating the life-stories of Buddhist monks.<sup>6</sup> While the collection itself is no longer extant, fragments of stories from this collection were quoted in later literature, and a still-extant companion collection, *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of nuns), which contains the life stories of sixty-five nuns, is also credited to Baochang. While there is some debate among scholars concerning the identity of the compiler, as well as the exact dates of these publications,<sup>7</sup> the existence of this sixth-century collection of biographical stories is generally recognized.

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<sup>5</sup> Baochang (ca. 466-518) was a Liang dynasty Buddhist monk. He was commissioned by the Emperor to undertake a number of translation and cataloguing projects, among which was an official catalogue of Buddhist scriptures in the Liang Imperial library, titled *A Catalog of Scriptures of the Liang Dynasty*.

<sup>6</sup> Kieschnick, "Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks," 535-552; and also Shinohara, "Biographies of Eminent Monks in a Comparative Perspective," 477-500.

<sup>7</sup> Kieschnick, "Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks," 535-552; and Rauw, "Baochang: Sixth-Century Biographer," 203-218.



As the earliest recorded examples of such narratives, *Mingzeng zhuan* had set a basic structure for representation of monastic life-stories. It had developed “a system for categorizing different types of monks along the lines used in collections of biographies by court historians,”<sup>8</sup> dividing Buddhist monks into eight types according to their expertise. It was felt that the subject matter of the *Biqiuni zhuan*, female monastics’ life-stories, that served to elevate these figures and to elicit admiration, was precedent-setting. Kieschnick underscores the very positive representation of nuns when referring to the preface, where their lives were compared to “deep oceans and lofty peaks, like the sound of gold or the tingling of jade,”<sup>9</sup> and served as “pillars of support in a degenerate era.”<sup>10</sup> Despite on-going discussions about the actual dates and identity of the compiler of these earliest collections of monastic life-stories, the existence of such literary representations, beginning from the sixth century, had become an important starting point of Buddhist historiography in China, and also a point of orientation for studies of later Buddhist literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Kieschnick, “Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks,” 541.

<sup>9</sup> Kieschnick, “Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks,” 541.

<sup>10</sup> Kieschnick, “Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks,” 541.

Different from the *Mingseng zhuan*, a later collection of life-stories of Buddhist monks, titled *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of eminent monks), compiled by Huijiao 慧皎<sup>11</sup> (497-554) in the Liang Dynasty, was generally accepted as the collection to set the standard structure of Buddhist monastic biography in China. It was completed around 530 CE, and its careful structure and organization inspired similar collections of Buddhist monks' life-stories in later historical periods. The legacy of *Gaoseng zhuan* includes: *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continued biographies of eminent monks), written by Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667) and completed in 650 CE, *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Biographies of eminent monks of the Song dynasty) compiled and presented to the throne in 988 CE by Zanning 贊寧 (919-1001), and *Ming gaoseng zhuan* 明高僧傳 (Biographies of eminent monks of the Ming dynasty) compiled by Ruxing 如惺 in 1617.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the Chinese literary tradition, this genre of writing was exported to Japan, and later helped establish the genre of *ōjōden* 往生伝 (record of people who achieved rebirth in the Pure Land), a Japanese literary form popular from the late tenth century.<sup>13</sup>

One of the reasons for *Gaoseng zhuan*'s popularity over its predecessor was the improved categorization of the monks' collected stories. Huijiao classified the monks into ten categories, and in each category the life-stories of outstanding monks were selected for inclusion. Usually,

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<sup>11</sup> Huijiao (497-554) was a Buddhist monk, of the Jiexiang Temple in Zhejiang China. He was the compiler of *Gaoseng zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks), the first complete collection of such biographies still extant. The title was a deliberate allusion to the lost work of Baochang, *Mingseng zhuan* (Biographies of Famous Monks).

<sup>12</sup> Kieschnick, "Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks," 550-551.

<sup>13</sup> Blum, "Biography as Scripture: Ōjōden in India, China, and Japan," 329-50.

they had some special achievement in terms of Buddhist scholarship, religious faith, closeness to the ruling class, grand sacrifices, and achievement in Buddhist practices such as meditation, healing powers, and even supernatural abilities. The main body contains life-stories of 257 monks and the appendix lists 244 others, overall covering 453 years of distinguished Buddhist monks' experiences. These early Buddhist biographies inspire believers to follow the examples of these eminent Buddhist masters in their practice, to acquire knowledge and faith, and for some, even the ability to perform supernatural feats. Regarding how to treat these records of supernatural power, Sylvie Hureau has alerted us to "the well-known observation that one of the essential means used by biographers was to record events that fit the teaching of Buddhist scripture"<sup>14</sup> as a cultural practice. Quoting Michel de Certeau, Hureau remarked that "one cannot submit one literary genre to the laws of another one."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, given the cultural context, these early biographies, despite their record of masters exercising supernatural powers, "were full of sense and meaning for their readers. They played a significant role in the acceptance of the Buddhist faith in China and should therefore be seen as an important part of its history."<sup>16</sup>

Although the nature of the collection is explicitly life-stories of Buddhist monks, the content of these stories also provides useful details

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<sup>14</sup> Hureau, "Reading Sutras," 111.

<sup>15</sup> Hureau, "Reading Sutras," 116-117.

<sup>16</sup> Hureau, "Reading Sutras," 117.

about life and practices across historical periods. For example, there were references to the erection of steles (*bei* 碑) to commemorate the death of a prominent monk near the site of his monastery. On these steles, inscriptions of events related to the monk were often found. This suggests that the inscriptions, which were the source of these biographical collections, had the original purpose of establishing the reputation of the monastery at that site.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it has also been suggested that monastic biographies, which presented these holy men as a mediation between this world and the celestial world, were symbolically “called upon to secure the basic structure of society.”<sup>18</sup> Biographies of Chinese monks have developed from fragmented anecdotes to systematic records of exceptional religious achievements, and have played varied roles in different times in relation to lay communities. As historical documents, they are also resources for examining social and cultural practices, the evolution of values, and the interaction between the monastic community and the lay population.

### **Autobiography as a Literary Agreement: Identity of the Three Subjects and the Self**

The conventional autobiography is a prose narrative with a beginning, a long section of development where events experienced by the narrator are described, and a conclusion. This narrative is usually delivered by a

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<sup>17</sup> Kieschnick, “Buddhism: Biographies of Buddhist Monks,” 537.

<sup>18</sup> Shinohara, “Biographies of Eminent Monks,” 491.

single narrator, namely the main “character” of the text, the person who is supposed to have lived through the experiences documented in the narrative. Because of this special relationship between the author and the subject of the narrative, readers will also expect the information recorded in the text to be reliable and exclusive, as it is directly from the subject. This autobiographical form, which emerged from the Renaissance, marking the rise of individualism, is today a well-established subject of study. An early example of a religious autobiography is Saint Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions* completed in 400 CE, in which he “confessed” his past sins to the Christian God and proclaimed his strong faith, before moving on to a discussion of the scriptures. Although the narrative is addressed to the Christian God, it presents a distinct individual person—the middle-aged Augustine. This early religious autobiography shows clearly the basic substance of this literary genre—the self.

Although it sounds obvious, the “self,” as the main substance of an autobiography, has actually been the focus of much discussion. Philippe Lejeune gave a definition of the autobiography as: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”<sup>19</sup> The core of the autobiography is this personality of the named individual; all the choices made about the form, the content, and the manner of representation are to ensure that this personality can be conveyed to the readers. To ensure that the narrative can do this, it is

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<sup>19</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4.

important that the subject engages in introspection, and tells the truth as far as is possible, although deficient memory, the desire to exaggerate, and other factors will inevitably prevent the revelation of the complete truth. Lejeune suggested that, given the restrictions, a narrative can be understood as an autobiography if “there is identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about.”<sup>20</sup> Readers entering this experience of a personal narrative are to have formed an autobiographical pact with the author, that is “the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.”<sup>21</sup>

The identity among the three subjects is not the only complexity in the study of autobiographies. The self-narrated story covers a duration of several decades, therefore the same “name” that appears on the cover of the book actually refers to different “selves” as existing in different periods of the subject’s life. The writing self stands at the most contemporary point in the subject’s life, looks back on incidents that happened to younger versions of the same self, and decides on which experiences to include in this narrative so that the personality can come through. But which personality is being portrayed? The one that lived through the experience, or the one that is remembering the lived experience? At the point of writing, the author may have set a particular purpose for the autobiography and made decisions about the overall personality to be show-

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<sup>20</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 14.

cased. What if the autobiography is not written in one go, but is constructed through successive additions? What effects will the subsequent additions and changes have on the overall meaning of the autobiography? These issues will inform the following discussion of Master Yin Shun's autobiography, *An Ordinary Life*, which has gone through different stages of completion, and which turns a personal narrative into an impersonal lesson.

### **Master Yin Shun's Empty Self in *An Ordinary Life***

With the autobiography becoming a popularly accepted form of literary expression, monastics have used it to connect with the laity. Master Sheng Yen, for example, had written not only scholarly discussions of Buddhist practices and teachings, but also several personal writings in the form of travel literature, and an autobiography. His eleven volumes of travel writing documented his pilgrimages to major sites of Buddhist importance, recording the sight-seeing routes, and more importantly his personal reflections on how he had been inspired by his faith to make contributions to the religion at different stages of his teaching. Reading these volumes, readers can follow the footsteps of Master Sheng Yen, from his earlier work as a Chan (Zen) Master in America, teaching mindfulness to international followers, all the way to his establishing Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan to be a foothold for followers of the Buddhist

path in the contemporary world.<sup>22</sup> The voice of the individual who, because of his personal experience, perceived the specific need of contemporary people to be “education of the heart,” can clearly be gleaned from the uniquely personal records in these autobiographical travel writings.

Master Yin Shun’s autobiography also exhibits this strong interaction between the personal and the impersonal, and this can be seen in the chosen title: *An Ordinary Life*. He was born in 1906, and lived to ninety-three years of age, through two world wars, as well as tumultuous periods of Chinese and world history. In his autobiography, he talked about how the political circumstances created unexpected obstacles on his road to becoming a monk or, literally, leaving the family home (*chujia* 出家). His health had always been poor, and he had suffered a few serious illnesses in his life. At one point in 1971, he felt that the end was near, and wrote his autobiography. Subsequently, he recovered, and further chapters were added to this life story in 1993 and 1998. The definitive version, published in 1998, contains thirty-five chapters, nine more than the first edition written twenty-seven years earlier. Despite his long and eventful life, he called it an “ordinary life.” I suggest that this “ordinariness” is Master Yin Shun’s chosen method of illustrating some key Buddhist teachings for the readers through his own story.

The title of the first chapter outlines a possible framework for understanding this seemingly personal text: “Most Memorable in this Life is Causes and Conditions” (Yisheng nanwang shi yinyuan 一生難忘是因緣

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<sup>22</sup> Ding, “Monks’ Travelling Writing in Contemporary Taiwan Travel Literature,” 371-412.



). The mature narrator, looking back on his long life and decades of following the Buddhist path, could find nothing but an “ordinariness,” which had no influence on political and state affairs, no great impact on the spread of Buddhism (perhaps an expression of humility), and no dramatic involvement in saving or destroying human lives. For him, the overriding theme of his life, which was to be unfolded through the narrative, was this fundamental Buddhist principle of “causes” (*yin* 因) and “conditions” (*yuan* 緣), which together give rise to all that we see in life, including our very selves. This autobiographical narrator looked back and discovered that everything about himself “was moving forward in the midst of infinitely complex *yinyuan*.”<sup>23</sup> Instead of describing to us how his personality had driven him to the various experiences in his long life, he opened his life story by attributing all his encounters to the work of causes and conditions.

Having framed the narrative of his life with *yinyuan*, Master Yin Shun introduced a related Buddhist concept into this autobiography when he claimed that his life was so ordinary that it was “equal to an emptiness” (*dengyu yipian kongbai* 等於一片空白).<sup>24</sup> This “emptiness” is counter-intuitive because obviously the narrator of this autobiography had lived a long and eventful life, therefore the story cannot be empty in terms of content. At the same time, the conventional autobiography pre-

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<sup>23</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 1.

supposes a “self” who drives the actions and events that make up the narrative of this life. Readers entering the autobiographical pact expect the reading experience to be a chance to know this self intimately, and perhaps to be inspired as well. *An Ordinary Life* however promises a very different experience for its readers; instead of presenting a specific self that is driving the actions of a life, it is showing the readers how causes and conditions accumulate to create the series of encounters reported in the text. The three-step emergence of the text, in 1971, 1993, and 1998 is a most apt illustration of the empty nature of the “self.” In each of these instances, the narrator anticipated death because of serious illness, but the continuation or not of this consciousness was determined by the complex interaction of causes and conditions. The definitive “self” that readers expect to discover from the autobiography turns out to be no more than an illusion, just a voice that is the result of the coming together of circumstances at each available moment. Setting the scene with causes and conditions as the environment of all existence, Master Yin Shun prepares us to understand the self as encounters momentarily coming together and dispersing in the context of causes and conditions.

Besides his explicit introduction of causes and conditions as the setting of this narrative of an empty self at the beginning of the work, Master Yin Shun’s intention to use this narrative as a skillful means to communicate Buddhist teachings can be read in different parts of his autobiography. Referring to his scholarly discussions about different types of Buddha’s biography, Wang Li-na 王麗娜 has noted that Master Yin Shun himself has categorized the Buddha’s biography into two types: the first type mainly focusing on Prince Shakyamuni reaching nirvana, while the second type includes time as far back as the beginning of the world,

and the previous lives of the Buddha.<sup>25</sup> This second type of the Buddha's biography was written to strengthen the unity of the sangha, and Wang has argued that modern biographies of monks in China can be read as succeeding these traditional Buddha biographies,<sup>26</sup> especially when the Chinese biographical tradition was not particularly strong. In chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven of *An Ordinary Life*, we see a long list of Master Yin Shun's publications, many of which are his studies of previous masters. He remarked that his motive was to "comprehend the rationality of the teachings to clarify certain ideas about Buddhist thoughts."<sup>27</sup> I propose that since Master Yin Shun was well aware of the development of monks' biographies in Chinese for the purpose of strengthening the religious institution, and in line with the scholarly tradition, he contributed his autobiographical project to also serve the Buddhist institution rather than to share his personality with readers.

From within the prolific works of Master Yin Shun, one can also see his attitude towards documentation of personal stories. Hou Kun-Hung 侯坤宏, who started to compile *The Chronology of Master Yinshun* in 2006, referred to his conscious and careful documentation of historical

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<sup>25</sup> Wang, "The Research of Buddha's Biographical Literature," 548.

<sup>26</sup> Wang, "The Research of Buddha's Biographical Literature," 549.

<sup>27</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 170.

events, as Master Yin Shun believed that only through a historical perspective can we have a complete and contextualized understanding of Buddhism. He believed that having understood the situated meaning of Buddhism at different times, the lay public would be able to adapt the teachings and apply them meaningfully in their daily lives.<sup>28</sup> As he stated in his “Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma,” one should adhere to the principles of Buddhist teachings when conducting research or spreading the Buddhist teachings so that “the result will not be qualitatively different, anti-Buddhist Buddhadharma.”<sup>29</sup> He named the “three seals of the dharma” (*san fayin* 三法印) as guidelines to all acts of teaching and learning Buddhism: Impermanence (*zhuxing wuchang* 諸行無常), No-self (*zhufa wuwo* 諸法無我), and Nirvana (*niepan jijing* 涅槃寂靜). We have reason to believe that Master Yin Shun was consistent in using his own life-story in a manner consonant with much-earlier Buddhist biographical texts, to serve the purpose of furthering people’s knowledge and practice. In the following, we shall examine this “ordinary life” and see how Master Yin Shun practiced what he advocated.

### **“Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma:” Humanistic Buddhism and the Three Seals**

One of the many contributions Master Yin Shun is considered to have made, is the modernization of Buddhism in China, under the auspice of

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<sup>28</sup> Hou, “An Examination of the Life and Thought of Master Yin-shun,” 185-210.

<sup>29</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 1.

“Humanistic Buddhism” (*Renjian fojiao* 人間佛教), which may be understood as a Buddhism that is situated in the human realm. Very briefly, this involves a modern interpretation of some key Buddhist doctrines for lay people, as well as engagement in humanistic acts to practice Buddhism in daily life situations. Even in his scholarly work, he employed a more down-to-earth interpretation of Buddhist legends and stories about supernatural feats. Hou noted that “in terms of Buddhist classics, Master Yin Shun’s rational approach goes beyond the level of faith.”<sup>30</sup> He was also noted for treating scenes recounted in sutras as history, and reading Buddhist literature from a historian’s perspective,<sup>31</sup> “removing the spells from traditional Buddhist classics.”<sup>32</sup> Whether such an interpretation of Buddhist legends is the best approach to engage in Buddhist scholarship is not an issue to be discussed here, but Master Yin Shun’s respect for Buddhist writings as historical and cultural records, and our need to exercise critical judgement in their interpretation is in line with his advocating impermanence as a guiding principle for teaching and learning Buddhism. All that is written and studied is for the practical purpose of furthering our knowledge of Buddhism so that we can live accordingly.

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<sup>30</sup> Hou, “The Appreciation and Utilization of Buddhist Legends,” 273.

<sup>31</sup> Gong, “Studies on Buddhist Scriptures and Historiography,” 32.

<sup>32</sup> Gong, “Studies on Buddhist Scriptures and Historiography,” 35.

In his *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West* (2017), Bhikṣu Changtzu described Humanistic Buddhism as, “to practice Buddhism with humans as the core focus, while encompassing all that relates to humans as well, such as family, friends, society and even the environment.”<sup>33</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, Buddhism in Chinese society was mainly visible in chanting ceremonies conducted at funeral services, and in the Pureland practices of ordinary people. People prayed for wellbeing and good fortune in temples but did not live their lives according to the teachings of the Buddha. Master Yin Shun was inspired by a text in the *Zengyi ahan jing* 增一阿含經 (*Ekôttarikâgama-sūtra*), which reads “All Buddhas appear in the human realm, never has one become a Buddha in a heaven.”<sup>34</sup> The “human realm” thus became his focus and concern in his efforts to revitalize Buddhism in modern Chinese society. His teachings “emphasizes rationality, with less emphasis on the sacred. For attainment of the ultimate goal, it emphasizes rational ways, with a demotion of mystical religious experience and obscuring of divine power,”<sup>35</sup> and “focuses on *this* life, the improvement of *this* imperfect world.”<sup>36</sup>

While Master Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947) was credited as the first modern Chinese monk to advocate a human-oriented approach to Buddhism, Master Yin Shun’s citing of “Renjian Fojiao” permitted this ideal

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<sup>33</sup> Changtzu, *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Changtzu, *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> An, “Chin Kung: A “potential” Humanistic Buddhist,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> An, “Chin Kung: A “potential” Humanistic Buddhist,” 24.

to take root. Scholars have written about the development of this human-oriented approach in modern China, and some of the differences between the two masters' understanding and account of this approach.<sup>37</sup> Master Taixu's concept of "Human Life Buddhism" (Rensheng fojiao 人生佛教) was a direct response to Buddhism's focus on death, as seen in China during the 1940s, therefore he advocated hands-on practical work for the sangha, which was a much-contested view at that time. His practical sense had also manifested in his close relationship with political power at the time.<sup>38</sup> Master Yin Shun's "Humanistic Buddhism," however, had the aims of bringing Buddhism to the people, encouraging people to perfect the three unique human qualities of recollection, diligence, and morality, which will enable them to practice dharma and set them on the path to Buddhahood while promoting the cultivation of self-purification by continually acting to benefit others.<sup>39</sup> It can be seen that the focus is more firmly on the popularization of Buddhism among ordinary people, with the aim of improving humanity. To facilitate this, imparting knowledge

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<sup>37</sup> On developments of Buddhism in modern Chinese societies, see Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*; Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land*; Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*. On humanistic Buddhism see Chern, "Individual, History and Religion;" Ng, "Yin Shun's Interpretations of the Pure Land;" Long, "Humanistic Buddhism."

<sup>38</sup> Long, "Humanistic Buddhism," 1-25.

<sup>39</sup> Changtzu, *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West*, 25-31.

of Buddhism to ordinary people had to be supported by continuous scholarly research. This was why Master Yin Shun appreciated the Japanese Buddhist development of emphasizing research and valuing rational assessment.<sup>40</sup>

Plenty of examples can be found in *An Ordinary Life* to illustrate the truth of impermanence. The seventh chapter, titled “Karmic Conditions are On-going, Death is Difficult” (Yeyuan weiliao sihenan 業緣未了死何難) recorded six episodes of serious illness through different periods of his life, up to the age of sixty-two. He wrote, “with such weak health, even a small push from *yuan* will cause death,”<sup>41</sup> but his experience had shown him that if the karmic conditions were still active and on-going, he would not die. The lesson that he had learned from a recounting of his poor health and the serious illnesses he had suffered, was that “*yinyuan* is beyond imagination.”<sup>42</sup> His own efforts would not be the only driving force in the flow of his life, rather the karmic conditions would lead him to his destination, and he needed only to live a proper life according to the Buddha’s teachings and follow this karmic flow. Death to most people is the biggest event in life, and here Master Yin Shun’s sharing of his near-death encounters, and his revelation of karma as the driving force of life,

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<sup>40</sup> Ng, “Yin Shun’s Interpretations of the Pure Land,” 41.

<sup>41</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 35.



is a perfect example of learning the Buddhadharma according to its own principles.

Lee Chih-Ying reflected on how *An Ordinary Life* demonstrates the mystery of causes and conditions, when events could happen in completely unexpected ways and beyond human planning.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, even Master Yin Shun's original plan of renouncing the world and becoming a monk was thwarted by the political situation, and it was only after a few twists and turns that he managed to do that. His awareness of how causes and conditions were constantly bringing him to unexpected situations was clearly reflected in the way he presented various incidents in his long life. For example, he titled the twelfth chapter, "Hong Kong Does not Have a Karmic Connection with Me" (Xianggang yuwo wuyuan 香港與我無緣), recalling how despite his best intentions and hard work, he did not manage to build the planned Buddhist abode (*jingshe* 精舍) in Hong Kong when he arrived in June of 1949. Even though he had bought the land and had raised enough money for construction, his attending a conference in Japan on behalf of the Chinese Buddhist Society, added complications to securing his travel-visa and residency, which prevented him from going to Hong Kong.

Calmly accepting the flow of causes and conditions, which brought him to a felicitous place in Xinzhu, Taiwan, Master Yin Shun used the money to build a Buddhist abode there instead. He concluded the

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<sup>43</sup> Lee, "The Literary Features of Master Yin-shun's Autobiography *An Ordinary Life*."

chapter by affirming the mysterious work of causes and conditions, and how he had accepted this truth in his life. We see that, not only in events related to his personal life but in his dedication to spreading Buddhist teachings, Master Yin Shun had also followed the flow of causes and conditions, as he showed in Chapter Eighteen, “Causes and Conditions Relating to Buildings” (You guan jianzhu de yinyuan 有關建築的因緣). He recalled that through his five experiences of establishing Buddhist buildings, things just fell into place: location, money, construction; plans somehow simply took shape and the whole process came to a successful conclusion. When people complimented him on his meritorious life, he replied that he must have accumulated some good karma from good relationships with people, and that he had been inspired by the Dharma in his previous lives.<sup>44</sup>

His reference to good karma from his previous lives was in line with both Buddhist teachings and his humanistic approach to Buddhism. Encounters in this life could be the results of causes planted a long time ago (even before this life), and thus being able to meet the right conditions in this life. In the face of this truth, the way to ensure a good life is to improve behaviour, in order to continue planting good causes so that good results may later come to fruition. In Chapter Twenty-four, “Good Karmic Connections with Good Women” (Youyuan de shan nuren 有緣的善女人), he noted the stories of three women whom he encountered in

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<sup>44</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 106.

very different conditions but became devoted Buddhists in their own ways. Huitai 慧泰 harboured a deep sense of guilt for the death of her daughter, thinking that it was due to her own faults that her daughter fell ill and died young. Master Yin Shun explained to her “the right knowledge of Buddhism’s cause and result”<sup>45</sup> and she was relieved of her guilty feelings, and finally took refuge in Buddhism under his guidance. Huijiao had pursued Buddhist teachings from a young age and was already a Buddhist when she came to learn from Master Yin Shun. After listening to him and reading his books, she became a follower and actively participated in organizing seminars for the lay community. The third female follower he referred to was Hongde 宏德, who was brought to Master Yin Shun’s dharma talks by a friend. At first, she claimed that she would only listen and learn but would not be converted to Buddhism. After a year of conscientious learning, she requested to be converted and became a devoted follower. Soon after that, she suffered a serious illness which she thought would be the end. However, in her desperate condition, she let go of sadness and devoted her time to “be mindful of the three jewels.”<sup>46</sup> When she woke from her meditative sleep, her condition was drastically improved, much to the surprise of her doctor. Recovering from this serious illness, Hongde built a small Buddhist abode to show her gratitude and devotion

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<sup>45</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 141.

<sup>46</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 143.

to Buddhism; since then she has been a dedicated follower of Master Yin Shun. He reflected that she “came to learn on condition that she would not convert, but requested to be converted afterwards. This could only be described as having *yuan*.”<sup>47</sup> Their stories took up one chapter in his autobiography, an explicit illustration of impermanence.

Besides guiding people, a very important aspect of his Buddhist work was his writing. Chapter Twenty-seven, “The Remarkable Causes and Conditions of Publishing” (Chuban de shusheng 出版的殊勝因緣), was one of the later chapters added to the autobiography.<sup>48</sup> This lengthy chapter documented Master Yin Shun’s prolific level of publication, and acknowledged the great assistance he had in making these books available to people. Although it is not often that the author of an autobiography provides a detailed list of his own publications, Master Yin Shun stated that he wanted “to repay the great blessings bestowed [on me] by the three jewels.”<sup>49</sup> He was grateful for the causes and conditions, including all the people who had assisted him in various ways, in bringing about publication of these books so that Buddhist teachings could find their way to ordinary people. Moreover, he believed those “who made records, who

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<sup>47</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 144.

<sup>48</sup> The first edition of *An Ordinary Life* contained 26 chapters (68,000 words) and was published in 1971 when Master Yin-shun was 66 years old. The second edition had 6 more chapters (90,000 words), published when he was 88 years old, and the final edition was published in 1993, with the addition of 3 more chapters, when he was 93 years old.

<sup>49</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 186.

proofread, in their continuous contact with the dharma, would advance in learning it.”<sup>50</sup> Here he once again turned the personal narrative space into a selfless platform to deliver Buddhist teachings. In his own words, learners of Buddhism should embrace this selfless spirit, “not setting out from the position of the self to capture all.”<sup>51</sup> This is consistent with the second seal of the dharma: no-self.

Continuing to note his work on furthering the Buddhist cause, Master Yin Shun called the next chapter of the autobiography “The Causes and Conditions of Transmitting the Precepts” (Zhuanjie yinyuan 傳戒因緣). Beyond the books, here was practical work in which he had also participated in order to benefit followers of Buddhism. The focus was not on the fact that *he* had done the work, but the fact that these occasions had occurred: “in my life, participating in ceremonies of the precepts was merely a matter of rejoicing at their presence.”<sup>52</sup> The “self” was not an active force driving the actions, instead he was there to rejoice in the results of the flow of causes and conditions, because he was also a seamless part of this flow. Lee had studied Master Yin Shun’s autobiography as a narrative documenting an individual person’s interaction with

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<sup>50</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Yin Shun, “Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma,” 2.

<sup>52</sup> Yin Shun, *An Ordinary Life*, 192.

his changing locations during different periods of his life.<sup>53</sup> She felt that this subject-movement-location interaction had been a fruitful educational experience, so much so that she included the autobiography as a text in her liberal studies/general education class to inspire students to reflect on their own life and actions—focusing on three dimensions of “situation,” “curriculum,” and “role model.”<sup>54</sup> As already described, Master Yin Shun’s autobiography is in the form of a personal narrative, with the Buddhist “self” accepting and following the flow of causes and conditions throughout most of the twentieth century. In Lee’s adaptation of the master’s work, in her liberal studies class, and asking her students to regard him as a role model, she captured the essence of this autobiography: the goal of Nirvana. Master Yin Shun explained in “Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma” that learners of Buddhadharma “not only need to experience the scholar’s heart through the true meaning of their words, but also need to understand the impermanence and selflessness of the words of language, to experience Nirvana directly from the words.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lee, “Literary Features of Master Yin-shun’s,” 63-90.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, “The Idea of Cultivating Humanity and Instructional Design in General Education,” 100-101.

<sup>55</sup> Yin Shun, “Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma,” 3.

## Conclusion

Master Yin Shun has been described as a quiet and unassertive person: “his motto was to just flow with the current of causes and conditions. Rarely did he actively pursue something, apart from his studies.”<sup>56</sup> The above discussion, which refers to selected chapters from his autobiography, confirms what he advocated in “Using Buddhadharma to Study Buddhadharma” as a method of teaching and learning: following the approach of the three seals. In the narrative of his own life story, he set the flow of causes and conditions as the frame, no-self as the manifestation of all the encounters in his long life and presented the entire experience for readers as an example to inspire similar belief and practice. By leaving us *An Ordinary Life*, Master Yin Shun brought Buddhism to readers in the form of an autobiography and encouraged readers to perfect their human capacities of recollection, diligence, and morality in order to continually benefit others.

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<sup>56</sup> Changtzu, *Introducing Venerable Yin Shun to the West*, 55.

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### Notes on the Contributor

Prof. Amy Lee has a background in comparative literature and cultural studies. She has published creative non-fiction as well as critical studies in the area of contemporary feminist fiction, autobiographical writing,

witchcraft and magic, and using literature for creative learning experiences. A core research and pedagogical interest of hers is deploying narratives in educational settings to enhance personal well-being. In recent years she is exploring personal narratives in the Buddhist context, to see whether/how they are subverting traditional literary narratives. Currently she is conducting a research project using Playback Theatre to build creativity and self-understanding in inclusive communities. She is the Dean of the School of Education and Languages at the Open University of Hong Kong.

Correspondence to: Amy Lee. Email: [awslee@ouhk.edu.hk](mailto:awslee@ouhk.edu.hk)