

**Chuan Lyu Lectures in Taiwan Studies (2023)**  
**University of Cambridge**

***The Spectrum of Unlimited  
Possibilities for Religion in Taiwan***

**Unpacking and Reassessing  
Narratives and Protagonists**



**Dr Stefania Travagnin (SOAS)**

**First lecture: 4 May (Thur)**  
**Second Lecture: 9 May (Tue)**

**5pm, Room LG17, Faculty of Law (Sidgwick Site)**

## First Lecture

# *Making Sense of the Taiwanese Religious Scene*

## Preservation of the Past while Engaging with the Future



**5pm, 4 May (Thursday), 2023**

**Room LG17, Faculty of Law (Sidgwick Site)**

Buddhism, Daoism, Yiguandao, Christianity, Islam, but also aboriginal religions, and hybrid practices: these are just some of the faces of Taiwanese religion. Historically, beliefs and practices have undergone considerable changes but have also displayed underlying and solid continuities; and more recently, with the steady development of media and digital technology, they have transferred and reshaped their presence onto new platforms. This lecture will trace the development of the Taiwanese religious scenes through the analysis of a series of binaries and contrasts that, I argue, have given structure to local religious life. Inclusion and exclusion practices, private and public spheres, the past and the new: these contrasts have often co-existed in a sensible balance, but some other times they have engendered dynamics of tension. Some of these contrasts, as we will see, have also concerned and contributed to the process of formation of a ‘Taiwanese’ identity. The lecture will be based mostly on case-studies from Buddhist communities, and their participation in these contrasts and binaries.

## Second Lecture

# *Listening to Marginal Female Experiences* The Narrative of (In)visible Eminent Women in Taiwanese Buddhism



**5pm, 9 May (Tuesday), 2023**  
**Room LG17, Faculty of Law (Sidgwick Site)**

Religion in Taiwan has been characterized by a constant narrative of female figures. The most worshipped deities on the island are probably Mazu and Guanyin, two female deities that are associated with, respectively, Daoism and Buddhism, but are also found very often together in the same temples. And the most popular religious person today is the nun Zhengyan (b.1937), founder and leader of Tzu Chi Foundation, and whose charisma and works have been explored extensively by local and Western scholarship. This lecture will shift the attention from the well-known and studied Buddhist women to the less known but equally remarkable nuns that have been nonetheless protagonist of the Buddhist discourse. From the nuns who led women's practice during the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945) to the nuns who promoted women's ordination in the early 1950s; from the Buddhist woman who introduce Vajrayana practice to Taiwan to pioneers in the development of education and social service. These women have been clearly visible to certain communities and historical periods, while have later become invisible in the construction of the historical narrative. Listening to these more marginal female experiences will then help us rethink history and agency in the development of Buddhism on the island.

## Speaker



**Stefania Travagnin** teaches at SOAS, University of London. Before joining SOAS, she held the position of founding Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Culture in Asia at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. She has a MA in Chinese Studies from Ca'Foscari University (Italy) and a PhD in the Study of Religion from SOAS. Travagnin has done field research among Buddhist communities in Taiwan for more than twenty years, has been visiting scholar in several Taiwanese institutes like Academia Sinica, National Cheng Chi University, and the Center of Chinese Studies at the National Central Library of Taipei; she has active collaborations with Taiwanese Buddhist institutions like Tzu Chi Foundation, and is a research fellow at the Center for the Study of Buddhism in Taiwan in Hsuan-Chuang University. Her research and publications on religion in Taiwan have explored especially Buddhist women, the phenomenon of Humanistic Buddhism, religion and media, and life and works of the monk Yinshun. In the past few years she has also researched Buddhist communities in Sichuan, and is currently co-director of the multiyear project “Mapping Religious Diversity in Modern Sichuan” (CCKF funds, 2017-2023). She has edited or co-edited several volumes, including *Religion and Media in China: Insights and Case Studies from the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong* (Routledge, 2016), and the three-volume publication *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions* (De Gruyter, 2019-2020). She is also co-editor of the journal *Contemporary Buddhism*, and editor-in-chief of *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*.