

**Jinhua Jia, Xiaofei Kang, and Ping Yao (eds.)**

*Gendering Chinese Religion: Subject, Identity, and Body*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014. x+300 pp. \$34.95 paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-5308-8; \$90.00 cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-5307-1.

*Gendering Chinese Religion* represents an important and groundbreaking contribution to the study of Chinese religions, specifically with respect to women and (female) gender. As the editors claim, this edited volume will help to establish a subfield on women, gender, and religion in Chinese Studies.

Given that the book attempts to be located in both Chinese Studies/Asian Studies *and* Religious Studies, I will review it along both trajectories. Generally speaking, and as one might expect given the standard training and established approaches in Sinology, the various chapters are strong in terms of area studies and slightly less successful with respect to theory and method related to the academic study of religion. Specifically, while the authors demonstrate familiarity with major theories and theorists outside of Chinese Studies narrowly defined, their application and employment are somewhat underdeveloped. As is often the case, it occasionally feels as though theory and “data sets” lack thorough integration.

The book chapters originated from the first International Conference on Women and Gender in Chinese Religion (University of Macau, June 17–20, 2011), and range from the early medieval period to the present. The volume consists of an introduction and three parts, titled “Restoring Female Religiosity and Subjectivity,” “Redefining Identity and Tradition,” and “Rediscovering Bodily Differences,” each of which includes three chapters.

Developing and going beyond the foundational work of Judith Berling, Suzanne Cahill, Catherine Despeux, Patricia Ebrey, Charlotte Furth, Beata Grant, Livia Kohn, and Chün-fang Yü, among others, *Gendering Chinese Religion* is noteworthy for its inclusion of international and younger female Chinese scholars, of less common materials such as epigraphy (Ping Yao), fiction (Zhang Ni), political materials (Xiaofei Kang), and theater (Kang), as well as of less researched topics such as Buddhist laywomen (Yao; Neki Tak-ching Cheung), female Chan Buddhist masters (Beata Grant), and Christianity in Hong Kong (Wai Ching Angela Wong). The employment of ethnography and engagement with the “lived religion” of actual women, rather than textual reconstructions and historical approximations, is especially significant. Here the chapters on Chinese Christian laywomen in modern Hong Kong (Wong) and Chinese Buddhist laywomen in modern Fujian (Cheung) stand out.

In their helpful introduction, the editors outline some of the major issues related to the consideration of women and (female) gender in Chinese reli-

gions. They draw attention to what they refer to as “double blindness” in the study of gender and religion, specifically the tendency in Gender Studies to be “religion-blind” and the tendency in Religious Studies to be “gender-blind” (pp. 1–2; also pp. 7 and 13). The authors, following Ursula King, call for a “gender-critical turn” in the study of (Chinese) religions (pp. 1–2). From this perspective, one encounters religion in China, whether pre-modern or modern, as both constraint and possibility, as simultaneously and paradoxically a locus of oppression, creativity, resistance, and subversion. As summarized by the editors, the volume makes two fundamental arguments. “First, Chinese women have deployed specific religious ideas and rituals to empower themselves in different historical and social contexts. Second, the gendered perceptions and representations of Chinese religions have been indispensable in the historical and contemporary construction of social and political power” (p. 12). In these statements, careful readers may notice a particular social scientific and perhaps social constructivist view of religion (e.g., emphasis on socio-political contexts and power relations), one that may obscure as much as it reveals in terms of lived female religiosity.

Turning to the nine individual chapters in terms of Sinological contributions, in Chapter 1, Ping Yao discusses the role of Tang women in the transformation of Buddhist filiality. Utilizing various epigraphic sources, especially votive inscriptions on Buddhist sculpture (*fozao xiang* 佛造像) (pp. 26–27, *passim*), Yao draws attention to the ways in which Buddhist notions of “merit transference” (*zhufu* 追福) and indigenous Chinese ancestor veneration were combined by Chinese women (including Buddhist nuns) during the Tang, were utilized in particular ritual contexts, and ultimately assisted in the Sinification of Buddhism. These notions also included distinctive donations (e.g., statuary, sutras, cremation stupas) by “filial Buddhist daughters” (pp. 31–34) for the welfare of their parents, especially as an expression of the mother-daughter bond. In the second chapter, Beata Grant continues her pioneering work on female Chan Buddhist masters, with particular attention to the autobiographical sermon of Jizong Xingche 繼總行徹 (b. 1606). Grant explores how this “auto-hagiography” both conforms to and deviates from standard hagiographical models. She emphasizes that these are not merely constructs or “quasi-fictions.” This approach includes a complex negotiation on Jizong’s part, in which she attempts both to shed her female gender and to express her own experience as a (female) Chan Buddhist master. In Chapter 3, Zhanghe Ni discusses the female Chinese author Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999) and her autobiographical novel *Jixin* 棘心 (Thorny heart; 1929, rev. 1957), with specific attention to the representation of “religion” and “woman.” This study is particularly fascinating given Su’s own conversion to Roman Catholicism in France in 1924,

the representation of Catholic Christianity in *Jixin*, and Su's subsequent flight to Hong Kong in 1949, where she worked with the Catholic Truth Society, and finally her emigration to Taiwan. One noteworthy feature of this chapter is Ni's exploration of the term *zongjiao* 宗教 as a Chinese (via Japan) approximation of the Western category of "religion" (pp. 80–81, 87–94), with particular attention to Su's multi-dimensional and uneasy position in Roman Catholicism and Chinese nationalism, both personal and collective.

In Chapter 4, Jinhua Jia examines the identity of Tang Daoist priestesses, emphasizing what she claims is the misidentification of some as "courtesans" and "semi-courtesans." Jia explores the sexuality and sexual practices allegedly associated with specific female Tang Daoists as well as their social location and participation with respect to the Daoist tradition. From Jia's perspective, "The notion of gender identity as constitutive of culture, society, and discourse also means that there are possibilities for emancipatory remodeling of identity, and that 'agency begins where sovereignty wanes'" (p. 104). Specifically, these Daoist priestesses played an important role within Daoism and the larger society, and they exercised their own agency in creating personal religio-cultural identity. In the fifth chapter, Xiaofei Kang discusses women, gender, and religion in Chinese Communist revolutionary propaganda through an examination of the opera *Baimao nü* 白毛女 (White-haired girl; 1945). Kang engages the issues of women and gender in relation to the twentieth-century projects of secularization and the replacement of religion with nationalism as components of revolution and nation-state building. In Chapter 6, Wai Ching Angela Wong examines Chinese Christian women in postcolonial (post-1997) Hong Kong, with particular attention to questions of patriarchy in both Chinese society and Christianity. Drawing upon case studies of forty-two women from diverse backgrounds, Wong suggests that "despite the double patriarchies prescribed by the Christian and Chinese traditions together, the ambivalence lived by Christian women in the Chinese society of Hong Kong has provided them with a creative space of negotiation for the cause of women" (p. 159). In addition to demonstrating the complexity and diversity of this negotiation, Wong also highlights the construction of "family," heterosexual normativity, and mandated patterns of familial and social reproduction. Modern Hong Kong Christian women, engaged in their own unique lives, reveal "dual identities," "resistant hybridity," and "internal contradictions" (pp. 174–75).

In Chapter 7, Gil Raz examines "birth" as a metaphor for transformation in early medieval Daoism. He emphasizes that early medieval Daoist materials, precursors to and foundations for the later emergence of internal alchemy (*neidan* 内丹), advocate complete psychosomatic transformation through intensive meditation practice. There is a complex employment of the metaphor

of “giving birth to the perfect self” (p. 183, *passim*) as well as various discussions of “gestation” and the so-called “embryonic knots” (*jie* 結). Raz shows that, in terms of women and gender, such concerns are multivalent and at times ambivalent. According to Raz, “the aspect of yin as an abstract creative force” does not carry over to “the physicality of the female body” (p. 184, 198). In the eighth chapter, Elena Valussi continues her pioneering work on “female alchemy” (*nüdan* 女丹), a late imperial form of internal alchemy that is specifically for women and that addresses the uniqueness of female embodiment (e.g., blood, breasts, uterus). Valussi correctly recognizes the complex question of “femaleness” in this Daoist practice, specifically the degree to which it actually empowers women. “Surely the female body is a locus for transformation. But is it also a locus of power and resistance?” (p. 221). Although one may disagree with Valussi’s interpretation as overly simplistic, one may also follow her in imagining and perhaps advocating a “truly ‘female’ alchemy” (p.221). While Raz believes that androgyny or meta-gender is the ideal in his materials (pp. 197–98), Valussi identifies a gender reversal, in which “masculinity” is ultimately privileged (p. 221). In the final chapter, Neki Tak-ching Cheung examines female Chinese Buddhist menopausal rituals in modern Fujian, identifying, with certain parallels to Valussi, complexity and ambiguity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork from 2002 to the present, Cheung provides a detailed discussion of the *jiezhu* 接珠 (“receiving [Buddhist prayer] beads”) rite of passage, which commemorates the menopausal event and a woman’s transition to a new social role and identity. For Cheung, this research represents a necessary corrective to the “neglect of women’s ritualization ... as reflective of an androcentric approach in academic research” (p. 226). She provides an important glimpse into a particular expression of lived female religiosity in modern China, one that simultaneously diminishes female embodiment and empowers the agency of the women involved.

While there can be little debate about the volume’s contribution to Chinese studies and Asian studies, the various chapters would have benefited from deeper engagement with and reflection on theory and method derived from and applicable to the academic study of religion. Like many Sinological publications, the book lacks a thorough integration of theory and exempla, though such an endeavor is problematic in its own ways. Some key theorists are cited for understanding; these include Talal Asad, Timothy Fitzgerald, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Ni); Pierre Bourdieu and Eric Hobsbawm (Wong); as well as Mary Douglas (obliquely), Rita Gross, Rosemary Radford Reuther, and Victor Turner (Cheung). However, one is left wondering about how to develop studies that may serve as models for such interpretive frameworks. Original and innovative Sinological research can be difficult in itself, to say nothing of the more

daunting task of incorporating a comparative religious studies methodology. Nonetheless, without the use of more sophisticated theoretical approaches, it will be difficult to imagine the success of the editors' aspiration to develop a subfield on women, gender, and religion in Chinese Studies, especially one in which "double blindness" is overcome.

Finally, I am unconvinced about the supposed "androcentric categorization of Chinese religions into Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion" (back cover). While provocative, such a claim itself diminishes the pivotal role that women have played and continue to play in these traditions, including their role as sources of identity and subjectivity. Moreover, for there to be an authentic "gender-critical turn," we must avoid the equally problematic construction of "men" and "masculinity" at work in some of the research. "Gender" is not simply about female experience and empowerment, although that is an essential concern. In addition, more work needs to be done on the ways in which men both deviated from mandated social norms, constraints that no doubt limited them as much as women, and subverted structures of oppression with respect to women. Here Grant's chapter on Jizong, Valussi's chapter on female alchemy, and Cheung's chapter on the *jiezhu* ritual provide ample opportunities for reflection. For example, Valussi demonstrates that various men were key authors and compilers of texts on female alchemy, a practice that both disempowers and empowers women in complex ways.

In sum, *Gendering Chinese Religion* is a major contribution to the academic study of Chinese religions, especially with respect to women and gender. It opens up new vistas and research trajectories that provide important models for the transformation of Chinese Studies. It is to be hoped that the new subfield envisioned, explored and advocated in this volume becomes more established and developed.

*Louis Komjathy*

University of San Diego

*komjathy@sandiego.edu*

Copyright of NAN NU -- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.