

Book Reviews

Gendering Chinese Religion: Subject, Identity, and Body. Edited by Jinhua Jia, Xiaofei Kang, and Ping Yao. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 300. \$90.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

Gendering Chinese Religion breaks new ground in the study of both gender and religion by utilizing an interdisciplinary approach to present new data and stimulating analyses about how women have contributed to Chinese religious life. Jointly edited by Jia Jinhua (University of Macau), Kang Xiaofei (George Washington University), and Yao Ping (California State University, Los Angeles), this volume succeeds in delineating the wide range of gender patterns that have helped shape Chinese religions. *Gendering Chinese Religion* also sheds new light on women's religiosity and subjectivity, investigates the manifold forms of discourses on women's religiosity, and enhances our understanding of women's bodies, bodily differences, and embodiment. The book's authors deserve credit for attempting to overcome the problem of "double-blindness" in the study of gender and religion, whereby scholars in gender studies overlook the importance of religion, while many who research religion fail to pay sufficient attention to gender (see pp. 1–2, 13). In addition, *Gendering Chinese Religion* is noteworthy for its dynamic use of practice theory, which allows the authors to treat Chinese women as actors striving to negotiate their place in religious arenas by means of strategies intended to reinterpret and manipulate traditional norms, while also selectively drawing from repertoires of resources to construct their own identities and empower themselves (pp. 3, 5 10, 12).

The nine chapters contained in *Gendering Chinese Religion* are evenly divided into three separate sections. In Part I (entitled "Restoring Female Religiosity and Subjectivity"), the first chapter by Yao Ping focuses on Tang dynasty funeral inscriptions carved on Buddhist pagodas (*futuming* 浮圖銘) and cremation stupas (*huishen taming* 灰身塔銘) to examine the importance of filial piety on the part of daughters who were Buddhists. The links between Buddhism and filial piety have been extensively researched, and a growing number of scholars are now starting to utilize Buddhist epigraphic sources. However, Yao's work surpasses previous research by emphasizing the importance of maternal agency in defining filial piety and guiding children on religious paths (pp. 35–37).

The next pair of chapters in this section considers the importance of women's autobiographical writing. Beata Grant presents a moving description of the late Ming Chan master Jizong Xingche's 繼總行徹 autobiographical sermon (*yulu* 語錄), which

portrays her struggles in dealing with pressure to marry as well as rigours of pursuing self-cultivation. Grant's thought-provoking interpretation of Jizong's sermon is highly convincing in its portrayal of this text as a "subtle reinscription" of conventional norms: While Jizong attempted to shed her gender and situate herself squarely in Chan male lineages, her sermon's contents make it impossible for readers to ignore her gender, thereby displaying not only her agency but a sense of self-confidence (p. 66). Ni Zhange's study of the autobiographical novel *Thorny Heart* (*Jixin* 棘心) by the renowned writer Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999) shows that autobiographical fiction constituted a highly charged discursive space where categories could be constructed and boundaries problematized (p. 71). Ni's chapter also treats the issue of Catholic women's identity as seen in the impact of nuns and laywomen, as well as European missionaries trying to cultivate and promote Chinese Catholic literature (p. 77). The chapter concludes with considerations of an essay Su wrote about religious changes during the Republican era. However, while Ni's claim that discourses on religion during that time period were not "a monopoly of male intellectuals" has merit, additional data other than Su's writings will be required in order to fully demonstrate women's roles in the "redefinition of Chinese religion into *zongjiao* 宗教" during and after the May Fourth Movement (pp. 90–94).

Part II ("Redefining Identity and Tradition") opens with a thought-provoking study of Tang-dynasty Daoist priestesses by Jia Jinhua. This chapter is particularly noteworthy for revealing that the religious practice of sexuality helped legitimize Daoist priestesses' emotional experiences, and that these specialists also strove to empower themselves via cults to erotic goddesses. Jia's data shows that sexuality was an integral part of Daoist self-cultivation, both spiritually and at times even physically; therefore, while it was not forbidden, it did have to be regulated (pp. 104–5, 110) (these observations are also related to the chapters by Gil Raz and Elena Valussi discussed below). Moreover, Jia suggests that the legitimacy of Daoist priestesses' experiences could help shape their relationships with elite men to the point of enabling such women to take the initiative in such relationships (pp. 111, 116). Jia's chapter also challenges the use of the term "courtesan" to describe these practitioners, noting that, unlike courtesans, priestesses often had independent socio-economic status and could benefit from forms of upward mobility (pp. 103–4, 117).

The chapter by Kang Xiaofei provides a lively consideration of how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made use of the *White-haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女) story, which gained immense popularity beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, as a means of repackaging traditional religious symbols in the service of mass mobilization designed to solidify the Party's power (pp. 135–36) (religion's place during the early years of CCP rule has also been studied by Steve A. Smith). Kang clearly demonstrates that the CCP promoted new representations of the female body and sexuality as part of

its efforts to disassociate traditional religion and morality from peasant life. These processes relied on conventional symbols yet manipulated them to construct new political realities, for example playing on the ambiguous nature of female deities by emphasizing their ghostly features while also identifying the Buddhist practices of the story's mother-in-law as exemplars of the corrupt old order (pp. 143, 146–47). The wealth of data that Kang has collected also point to the importance of performance in expressing a sense of victimization and promoting collective emotional experiences (pp. 148–49).

Wai Ching Angela Wong's chapter on women and Christianity in Hong Kong points to the significance of this city as a venue for cross-cultural interaction, as well as concerns over how Christianity may fare due to changing political conditions today. Based on data collected during an oral history project, Wong makes an important observation, namely that while Christianity advocated for women's education and tried to stop abuses of Chinese women, it could also embrace strong patriarchal values. Wong's chapter contains wrenching accounts of how Christian women have struggled to negotiate places for themselves in Hong Kong society while pursuing and at times openly embracing lifestyles that are still considered to be controversial, including lesbianism and transsexuality (pp. 159, 161, 164, 168, 171). The tensions that have resulted merit comparison to other Christian communities in Asia, for example Taiwan. There is also room for further consideration of the seeming contradiction of Christianity's advocating for women's rights while continuing to stress patriarchal ideals (pp. 158–59, 163), which is readily apparent in the debates over abortion and women priests in the West.

The book's final section ("Recovering Bodily Differences") features a dynamic duo of essays on Daoist self-cultivation by Gil Raz and Elena Valussi. Raz's chapter, which explores self-cultivation techniques specifically designed for male Daoist practitioners of the medieval era, enhances our appreciation of their overall import by observing that while such practices featured cosmological schemes that attempted to erase gender differences, their overall goal was not for men to transform selves into women, but rather one of "transforming their male bodies into unitive bodies that incorporate birthing abilities" (pp. 193, 197–98). For her part, Valussi presents a thought-provoking study of self-cultivation techniques specifically designed for women (*nü-dan* 女丹) that began during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as the tensions that arose over control of these practices. In addition to its wealth of new data, this chapter also suggests a number of related topics worth further scholarly attention in the future, including the importance of religious publishing and medical self-help texts as well as the role of spirit-writing. However, the most striking aspect of this chapter is that, despite the fact that the discourse of these self-cultivation techniques consciously contrasts with that of male practices like those described

by Raz, most of its texts were in fact written by men, and the ultimate aim of these techniques remained for women's bodies to become more like men's (including shrinking breasts and cessation of the menstrual cycle) (pp. 203–7, 215, 220–21). These phenomena suggest the need to further consider the extent to which women's self-cultivation techniques enabled escape from gender roles, as well as whether they promoted the empowerment of women's bodies or instead the transformation or aspects of womanhood that were seen as potentially polluting. These issues could also be explored in the context of various forms of self-cultivation performed by Buddhist women that are treated in other chapters in this volume.

Part III concludes with Neko Tak-ching Cheung's vivid ethnographic account of the lay Buddhist rite known as "Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads" (*jiezhu* 接珠), which is usually performed for menopausal women. Cheung's data indicates that women who take part in such rites not only do so to cope with changes in their lives, but also to form new social circles as well as assert their status and power. Cheung also points out that "Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads" rites are full of seemingly contradictory symbols, including death and rebirth, girlhood and womanhood, and re-enacting weddings plus rehearsing funerals (pp. 227, 234). In addition, their performance involves the blending of a woman's patriarchal and uterine families, especially the participation of female agents who are members of the latter (most notably her mother and married daughter(s)) (pp. 228, 229, 238–44), with female relatives being responsible for providing nearly all the gifts (pp. 235–36, 239). At the same time, however, the woman's husband is obliged to serve as both initiator and host of the ritual, which features an abundance of conjugal symbols and women both bemoaning unhappiness with their current husbands while expressing the wish for a better marriage in a future lifetime (pp. 229, 232, 234).

Gendering Chinese Religion represents a major contribution to our understanding of women's roles in the development of Chinese religious traditions. The editors and authors coherent presentations of valuable new data, as well as elucidating its significance through stimulating analytical frameworks that go a long way towards answering the questions posed in the Introduction, is particularly praiseworthy. Readers will also appreciate the book's extensive bibliography and ample use of Chinese characters. In short, this book marks a critical milestone in the field of Chinese Studies, and will constitute a solid standard by which future contributions can be measured.

Like any work of a pioneering nature, *Gendering Chinese Religion* does contain its share of flaws and issues that merit further consideration. To begin with, despite the pronouncement in the blurb that this book "departs from the conventional and often male-centered categorization of Chinese religions into Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion," its contents are mainly devoted to religions generally

labelled as “institutional,” including Buddhism (three chapters), Daoism (also three chapters), and Christianity (two chapters). In contrast, there is very little data on popular religion, and nothing on sectarian movements in which women have played leading roles (the Way of Former Heaven or Xiantiandao 先天道 is but one example). Another significant lacuna is beliefs and practices about non-Han women, especially in Southwest China, where a steadily growing body of research has made great progress in our understanding of their religious lives as well as the importance of female deities.

In addition, more could have been done to ensure that these fine chapters actually achieved the goal of engaging in a “coherent dialogue” (p. 12). While this is indeed the case of the Raz and Valussi chapters, it seems a pity that Ni and Wong did not engage in systematic comparisons of their work on Christian women. Similarly, Valussi’s analysis on the need to regulate women’s sexuality during Daoist self-cultivation merits consideration alongside Jia’s findings, while Cheung’s work on the importance of menopause in women’s religious practices could have been compared to the Valussi chapter.

Gendering Chinese Religion also raises a number of key conceptual issues that, while not fully addressed in this volume, are worthy of additional research. For example, while the Introduction proposes to examine the ways in which “gendered perceptions and representations of Chinese religions have been indispensable in the historical and contemporary construction of social and political power” (p. 12), the book itself tends to devote more space to the former type of power over the latter. In addition, with the exception of the Ni, Kang, and Wong chapters, relatively little attention was devoted to changes in Chinese religious life during the modern era, as well as women’s roles as agents of such change.

Another problem is that the Introduction’s theoretical impact is somewhat diminished by the occasional presence of vacuous statements like “genuine urgency for the great possibilities of more in-depth conversations” (p. 12) and “[g]ender is everywhere” (p. 14), as well as a few instances of sloganeering (“scholars must be trained . . .” on p. 15, and “we must embrace . . .” on p. 16). Finally, there are a few typos, such as (*huishengtaji* 灰身塔記) for (*huishentaji*) on p. 28, and (*dia xiang* 點香) for (*dianxiang*) on p. 233.

These few flaws in no way detract from the valuable contribution that *Gendering Chinese Religion* has made, however. Its contents will be sure to spark new and exciting research on previously overlooked aspects of Chinese religious life, while it has immense value for classroom use as well.

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