
This book explores the fate of separate spaces for women's religious practice in Henan province from the late imperial period into contemporary times, with a primary focus on the Republican period and contemporary practice. It tells the story of women whose spiritual devotion ensured the survival of institutions which faced many threats in China's long twentieth century. The authors aim to place the narratives of these "believing women" at the center of their account—although the lack of source material is sometimes a challenge in this endeavor—showing how they have acted to safeguard and develop temples, mosques, convents and churches in which they and others can practice their faith.

Jaschok and Shui’s work builds on their earlier collaboration in the study of women's mosques in China. The book represents an extended dialogue between the perspectives of the two authors, aimed at “bring[ing] believing women into mainstream historical narratives” (p.5). Aside from the introduction in which both writers present their separate motivations for this endeavor, all parts of the volume are co-authored. In this new book, Jaschok and Shui expand their field of vision to include three Daoist and Catholic religious institutions run by and for women in Henan at Zhengzhou, Kaifeng and Jingang. They also discuss a feminine religious form that has resisted incorporation into a specific site: the tradition of independent celibate Catholic women, known in nineteenth century texts as "virgins," who choose to serve the church outside convents. By situating their analysis in a set of contiguous locations, Jaschok and Shui show how the institutions of the three religious traditions formed part of a local cultural nexus. They write, “[c]hanges were instigated, traditions hardened and reforms initiated within the pluralism of the religious culture of Henan” (p. 12).

The account concentrates on demonstrating how particular institutions and the women involved in them addressed the challenges of the project of modernization, both in the late imperial and Republican periods, and in the post-Mao era. Parts I and II of the book focus on overlapping periods, with the first concentrating on setting the scene for the Republican modernization project by outlining the history of Daoist and Muslim
women’s religious practice, while the second charts the arrival of Catholics in the Republican era. A key theme throughout is how religious women have been affected by efforts to “modernize” cities, religion, women and education, as well as by the tension between nationalist sentiments and Westernization in such projects. Education is a particular focus, and Jaschok and Shui show that female religious institutions were not only acted upon in these processes, but served as “vital conduits of transformation” of women’s lives as they took up the challenge of popularizing women’s education in a variety of ways. However, such engagements were uneven, and some religious spaces were labeled “backward” and “superstitious” and threatened with closure. Here a degree of continuity between Republican China and the contemporary scene is apparent, although modern female religious institutions must now deal with a much greater degree of state control, as described in Part III, which traces the contemporary manifestations of some of the institutions introduced in the earlier sections. But as Jaschok and Shui point out, some female religious leaders have strategically deployed the Communist Party’s commitment to gender equality to win more independence from men in the administration of their dedicated religious spaces.

The question of space is also addressed in terms of the opposition between hearth and temple as sites for women. In the late imperial period, popular religious institutions that attracted female adherents were presented by some Confucian scholars as morally questionable. As a potential alternative to the family for women, these spaces presented an implicit challenge to patriarchal dominance. While a commitment to either hearth or temple in imperial times meant exchanging one form of seclusion for another, in the modern period, these institutional spaces have given some women an entry into public life, through devotion and service.

For this reader, the most effective part of the book is the section on the fate of female-led religious institutions in the Republican era, when General Feng Yuxiang sought to bring Christian modernity to Henan (chapters 4-8). It explores the role of religious bodies in the growing movement to educate women, demonstrating how these efforts affected institutions associated with the three religious traditions differently, and examining the interactions between them. This section also presents a nuanced portrait of Catholic missionary work in Henan, showing both the racism implicit in the divisions
between native and foreign religious practitioners, and the spiritual and social engagement of Catholics. These chapters could be used effectively as a unit in teaching about women’s history in modern China.

The book draws on a wide range of sources which are used to build an account of the evolution of the institutions studied over the twentieth century. These include local archives, both official and unofficial, in Kaifeng and Zhengzhou, memoirs, personal correspondence, archives of particular Catholic orders and interviews and observations by the authors. It also contains photographs by the authors of some of their key informants and of the contemporary physical environments of the sites they describe.

While the exceptional women at the center of this book find an alternative independent life beyond the confines of the usual gendered norms, I was left wondering what the effects of their labors and enthusiasm were on other women's lives, both among the larger circle of believers and on outsiders. Particularly in the chapters on the contemporary period, the authors are concerned to allow their informants to speak in their own words, and not to analyze their actions. As Jaschok and Shui themselves note (citing the work of historian Merry Wiesner-Hanks), religions have both transformative and conservative dimensions, and the relations between these are made manifest in the local institutions where they are practiced. Their account concentrates on the transformative element, which is uppermost in the sensibility of women who have devoted their lives to the religious institutions they describe.

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