
This important volume presents a rich selection of essays offering new ‘gender-critical’ perspectives on Chinese religions. As the editors point out, social science studies have often neglected religion, and religious studies have too often neglected the question of gender. The volume is an attempt to remedy this, as well as address the particular disciplinary feature of Chinese Studies where Daoism and Buddhism have been studied in Religious Studies while Confucianism has been firmly located in Sinology. The volume presents a medley of studies, primarily of women and gender in Chinese religions, with a wide span of methodologies, from historical to literary and anthropological, and of time periods, from the medieval to the present. We are treated to incisive re-readings of filial piety in Buddhism (Ping Yao, Chapter 1), of Catholic women’s rights (Wai Ching Angela Wong, Chapter 6), of Daoist priestess’s identity (Jinhua Jia, Chapter 4) and female alchemical practices (Elena Valussi, Chapter 8), of Communist opera (Xiaofei Kang, Chapter 5) and feminized peasants, and much more. The thirty page bibliography is a very helpful resource for students and scholars.

The editors have grouped the essays into three sections to re-orientate the study of religion around gender and obviate the need for ‘Western’ categories of religion with their tendency to a single religious focus: texts by women, discourses on women’s identities, and discussion of bodily difference and religious subjectivity. Two overarching conclusions are made: that women have deployed specific rituals and ideas to empower themselves in varying historic contexts, and, more originally, that gendered perceptions of Chinese religions have been critical in the construction of political and social power in China. Several of the individual studies illustrate the first point, while chapters such as Kang’s essay on the White-haired Girl opera or Wong’s study of patriarchy in Hong Kong society and religion speak to the second point.

As a reader, the breadth of the volume makes for intriguing reading, but also raises methodological questions. How are we to read the (fictional) representation of female agency in a literary text, such as Zhange Ni’s study of a Su Xuelin novel (Chapter 3),
against the (mediated) voices of male-authored Tang female Buddhist hagiographies, against the (implied) spiritualities of temple rituals? The volume provides a series of exquisite studies, but thematic organization does not automatically translate into a theoretical coherence, and it may have been helpful to have had greater input from the editors providing inter-linkages among chapters, or more pointers to substantiate the claims of a ‘coherent dialogue’ about the intellectual possibilities and methodologies of the new field of women, gender and religion that the book cover proclaims. The editors wish to posit gender as a defining category of analysis, and one that transcends old-school religious categories, yet the individual studies remain, almost without exception, firmly rooted in the text/s or rituals of a single tradition—showing both the need for comparative work and its difficulty for specialists trained in a single field or body of texts.

The volume asks the critical question of how to move beyond recovering women’s experiences and voices to promoting a more gendered reading of religion per se. The question of how profitable it is to discuss women as a discrete category, rather than in relation to broader religious experience, is important, since any gendered element can only be understood in the context of shared ritual, liturgical and textual life and belief—alongside any distinctive female texts or practices. The book title claims ‘Gendering Chinese Religion,’ but Parts I and II are focused on female religiosity and identity, and gender is only really taken as a plural construct in the essays in Part III, theorizing the body (and two of the three concentrate on women’s bodies). The recovery of women’s voices in religious practices and the highlighting of women’s contributions to the development of religion in China is undermined a little by certain essays in the first two parts which seem to conceptualize religion as normatively male. A good example of a more integrated approach is Neky Tak-Ching Cheung’s study of a Buddhist menopausal ritual among the Hakka (Chapter 9), where Cheung makes the point that the participation of male family members accentuates the subordinate nature of the women’s role, or Beata Grant’s excellent study of seventeenth century Chan Master Jizong Xingche’s autobiographical sermon (Chapter 2), which highlights the discrepancies between Jizong’s own self-description as a (non-gendered) Chan master and her preface writers’ insistence on her accomplishments as a female monastic. The editors acknowledge in
their Introduction the perennial blurring of academic lines between gender studies and women’s studies, and we might be permitted a wry smile at the fact that the sole male-authored essay in the volume, by Gil Raz (Chapter 7), is the only one to focus on a male religious practice, albeit one with strong gendered connotations, that of re-birth. (Raz’ study of the reversal of the movement from gestation to death in medieval Daoist texts and the transformation of male adepts via re-birth is another fine example of a gender-critical reading, of a distinctly non gender- pc subject matter).

The editors have drawn together a captivating collection of studies and set out the parameters for a new academic sub-field: this is a pioneering volume and significant contribution to debates on women and gender in Chinese religion, and one which is bound to raise questions and provoke much thought for some time to come.

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