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


_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; Neky 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” (zhuifu 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, Zhange 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,