

# Introduction

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There was once a young village girl from North China named Xi'er 喜兒 who was raped by a landlord with the encouragement of his mother, a “pious” Buddhist. Xi'er was finally able to escape into the mountains where she gave birth to a baby girl. Xi'er continued to hide away in the mountains, living in dark caves and surviving on the temple offerings made by local villagers who, because of her prematurely white hair, mistook her for a deity and called her the White-haired Goddess. Eventually, Xi'er was rescued and saved by a young Communist named Dachun 大春, who led her into the sunlight and offered her both love and a new life. Readers may recognize the storyline of the popular 1945 opera, *White-haired Girl* (*Baimaonü* 白毛女), arguably based on a real story, that played such a crucial role in the success of the Communist land reforms of 1946–1947 as well as in the creation of the cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976.

Despite having enjoyed such immense popularity since the 1940s, the opera's gender and religious implications have thus far rarely been recognized. In more than one way, the current understanding of *White-haired Girl*, or the lack thereof, reflects the common problem of “double blindness” in the study of gender and religion. It has been almost thirty years since the publication of Joan Scott's influential article proposing gender as a “useful category of historical analysis,”<sup>1</sup> and scholarship on women, gender, and religion has increasingly become much more inclusive, nuanced, and multidisciplinary. Nevertheless, in an article published in 2004 advocating the “gender-critical turn” in the study of religion, Ursula King defined a continuing blindness both on the side of gender studies and on the side of religious studies: “On one hand most contemporary gender studies, whether

in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences, remain extraordinarily “religion-blind”; on the other hand many studies in religion continue to be profoundly “gender-blind.”<sup>2</sup> In 2009, Susan Calef chose the title “Charting New Territory” for the introduction to her edited volume on women, gender, and religion; in that work, she spoke of the relative lack of gender lenses for “seeing, thinking, and working” religion.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the authors in this volume have chosen to utilize gender-critical perspectives on familiar sources. We will find that the story of the *White-haired Girl*, as well as the lack of awareness of its religious impact, embodies perfectly both the complexity and the compass of Chinese religious traditions: multiple practices and rituals competing, mingling, and evolving; religious roles and influences interacting with the changing faces of gender ideology, political power, moral order, and social strata. Moreover, by uncovering new sources and revisiting old ones, the authors in this volume show that women have been at the center of Chinese religions all along: their religious experiences duly accounted or misinterpreted; their religious role publically justified or manipulated; their gendered bodies and sexuality ardently exemplified or victimized. Such underrecognized complexity clearly attests to the urgency and importance of facilitating multidisciplinary and comparative dialogues, integrating the studies of women, gender, and religion in the China field and thoroughly investigating their scope, methodologies, sources, and perspectives.

### The Development of the Field

The study of women and gender in Chinese religions has been inspired by two separate trends within women’s studies since the 1960s, one involving religious studies and one involving China studies. Scholars of religious studies, in what has been called a “paradigm shift from androcentric to androgynous models of humanity,” have been aiming to discover women’s experiences in major religious traditions not as a form of supplementary knowledge to male norms but as equally important, if often very different, human experiences.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, at its beginning the study of women and gender in Chinese religions was focused on the three major traditions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Whereas the topic of women in Confucianism has become a major concern among social and cultural historians and anthropologists of China, the topics of women and gender in Buddhism and Daoism have often been left exclusively to China scholars belonging to departments of “Religion.”

Within the China field, anthropological and historical studies have challenged the image of the “traditional Chinese woman” as passive victim as is characteristic of the May Fourth discourse on the Confucian “patriarchal” system.<sup>5</sup> Of course, in imperial China, and especially since the emergence of Neo-Confucian teachings in the Song dynasty (960–1279), women were expected to adhere to the principles of “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” (*sancong side* 三從四德), and elite women in particular were largely confined to their homes. Yet the degree to which the Confucian ideals of womanhood were actually striven for varied greatly according to age, class, family status, and location. There is much evidence that these ideals were often compromised, rejected, or manipulated by different social actors in different social, economic, political conditions. The most salient example is the late imperial cult of female chastity, which has been condemned since the late nineteenth century as one of the most heinous evils of Confucian patriarchy. However, recent historical studies have provided a far more nuanced and complicated picture of this cult, in which Confucian literati, state officials, imperial rulers, “faithful maidens,” and “chaste wives” interacted, contested, and at times contradicted each other in order to promote their own social and moral agendas.<sup>6</sup>

The three major traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism developed in constant dialogue with each other, and whether intentionally or not, scholarship on the latter two has been framed largely in response to the changing perceptions of the Confucian woman in both scholarly and nonscholarly circles. Early works on women in Buddhism and Daoism tended to focus on whether or not these two religious traditions reflected different sets of gender perceptions or provided alternative paths for Chinese women. In the area of Buddhist tradition, since Diana Y. Paul’s pioneering works on Buddhist women in Mahayana texts and Kathryn Ann Tsai’s groundbreaking study of the sixth-century monk Baochang’s 寶唱 *Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns* (*Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳) in the early 1980s, studies on Chinese Buddhist women have appeared in great number.<sup>7</sup> During the 1990s, scholarship on Buddhist women largely focused on the nuns whose names appear in Buddhist texts, historical writings, and literature or in annotated translations of texts relevant to the topic.<sup>8</sup> While Buddhist nuns continued to be a popular topic during the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars have broadened their research scope to explore the role of laywomen in spreading Buddhist teaching,<sup>9</sup> Buddhist women’s agency and subjectivity,<sup>10</sup> women’s contributions to the Chinese naturalization of Buddhism, as well as Buddhism’s role in the configuration of gender ideology throughout Chinese history.<sup>11</sup> These studies clearly demonstrate the extent to which the

study of gender in Chinese Buddhism has developed and matured over the last decade.

Similarly, studies on women and gender in Daoist tradition have also come a long way since the late 1960s and early 1970s when Ellen M. Chen's articles on the perceptions of femininity in Daoist classics first laid forth the claim that Daoism was more sexually egalitarian than Confucianism.<sup>12</sup> Although other scholars would continue to pursue this line of inquiry into Daoist "proto-feminism," beginning with Edward Schafer's works on divine and historical female figures of Daoism,<sup>13</sup> the academic focus gradually shifted to goddesses, immortals, priestesses, and sexuality in the Daoist tradition. One example of this is Suzanne Cahill's excellent study on the Queen Mother of the West.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, in their study of women in Daoism, Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn traced various female roles portrayed in Daoist texts.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the lack of social and historical contextualization of some of the earlier studies, recent scholarship has taken a more interdisciplinary approach to explore different dimensions. Scholars have demonstrated that Daoist priestesses have not only exemplified spiritual transcendence but also assumed multiple roles in society.<sup>16</sup> They have also investigated Daoist perceptions of the body, sexuality, ritual, meditation, and self-cultivation in terms of women and gender.<sup>17</sup> Many of their studies have combined methodologies of fieldwork, medicine, psychology, and sexology, as well as intertextual studies. In addition, they have produced excellent translations of Daoist texts that are particularly relevant to Daoist women.<sup>18</sup>

Studies of female deities, mythical figures, and gender-laden popular cults have begun to explore questions that lie outside traditional religious, cultural, and regional boundaries. They offer more nuanced analyses of the intermingling of religions, politics, gender institutions, and geography. Scholars have studied and compared erotic and magical goddesses and heroines of ancient cultures and discussed how changing political structures and, thus, changing perceptions of gender roles, dictated how myths were constructed and narrated.<sup>19</sup> The popular cults of Mazu 媽祖,<sup>20</sup> Goddess Taishan (Taishan niangniang 泰山娘娘), Lady Linshui (Linshui furen 臨水夫人),<sup>21</sup> and their relationship with local cultural traditions and the Daoist pantheon have been extensively studied. The worship of these and other major female deities is generally tied to beliefs about female pollution, and they embody countercultures to the established social norms and male hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> Vengeful ghosts and capricious spirits, such as the Wutong 五通 and foxes, also thrived on the margin of established religions, and their demonic characters were often associated with the dangerous power of female sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

The interdisciplinary nature of much recent research is also reflected in other studies. For example, the Bodhisattva Guanyin interweaves Bud-

dhist scriptural traditions and popular religious practices; scholarship on Buddhist nuns' poetry contributes to the field of Chinese women's literature; and investigations of both premodern and modern Chinese Buddhist women and laywomen contribute to our understanding of such questions as the Sinification of Buddhism and, more generally, to the religious and ideological roles played by gender in Chinese culture, society, and politics.

Once scholars begin to shift attention to women's agency in religious practices, the limitation of conventional boundaries, whether of academic discipline or of religious traditions, becomes even clearer. Buddhist and Daoist texts, for example, often reinforced the male-centered cosmological order and fundamental Confucian values, such as filial piety, chastity, and obedience, even as monastic communities and religious spaces offered women the possibility of lives that went beyond narrowly defined political and moral norms. Furthermore, from ancient times to the present day, women, as "household ritualists, lay devotees of a deity, shamans, nuns, and sectarian leaders," have played a great variety of roles at home as well as within and beyond their local communities.<sup>24</sup> For example, the late imperial Confucian discourse confined women's religious practices to the domestic arena, and religious women who provided professional services under the derogatory label of "Three Aunts and Six Grannies" (*sangu liupo* 三姑六婆) were generally considered "dangerous."<sup>25</sup> At the same time, however, female healers and midwives were proving to be able competitors in the late imperial medical market.<sup>26</sup> Female masters and sectarian leaders attracted a large number of followers.<sup>27</sup> Despite official bans, women's visits to temples continued unabated and women's piety proved "irrepressible."<sup>28</sup>

The arrival of Islam and Christianity greatly enriched Chinese women's religious life and, most notably, brought to the fore the issue of women and religion in the larger scheme of Chinese modernity. In 1978, Barbara Pillsbury's pioneering work presented a study of ethnicity, gender, and identity of Taiwanese Muslim women.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1990s, a number of anthropologists, sociologists, and historians turned their critical attention to Chinese Muslim women.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to the groundbreaking works by Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, we learn that from the mid-Ming dynasty (1368–1644) on, Chinese Islamic women had synthesized Muslim scriptural teachings and Confucian ethics and developed a distinct religious culture that included female-only mosques and women clerics.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the female clerical tradition in central China was so firmly established that many female mosques were able to stage a tenacious resistance against the Republican state's attempts at religious reform.<sup>32</sup>

While early encounters between Western Christian missionaries and Chinese women helped weaken traditional gender boundaries, women's

active participation in family rituals, pilgrimages, temple festivals, and sectarian activities paved the way for women's use of the Christian church as a source of self-empowerment. This, in turn, allowed them to escape arranged marriages, fulfill vows of chastity, or exercise forms of leadership normally unavailable to them. In converting to Christianity, Chinese women also contributed to transforming Christianity into a "local" and Chinese religion.<sup>33</sup> From the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century, Chinese Christian women have played crucial roles in promoting women's education, gender equality, and women's roles in the public space. They have been an indispensable force in shaping the course of Chinese modernization.<sup>34</sup>

Scholars of contemporary China have also noted the ways in which the forces of modernity and, in particular, the market economy have unleashed tremendous social mechanisms for a post-Mao religious revival. Although middle-aged and elderly women with little or no education have been accused of being obstacles to modernization because of their attachment to outdated "superstitions," they have turned out to be a major force in transmitting religious knowledge and sustaining local religious and ritual practices in rural and urban settings all over China.<sup>35</sup> Some of these women engage in the officially condemned practice of spirit mediumship, while others develop gender- and age-specific rituals designed to establish or strengthen their own status and power.<sup>36</sup> In addition, a growing number of younger-generation women, whether following family traditions or impelled by current situations and choices, have joined churches and entered newly restored nunneries.<sup>37</sup> These women, many of whom are well or moderately educated, often assume positions of leadership in state-sponsored religious institutions as well as in officially banned underground churches and organizations. They have found that the Communist promotion of gender equality has its limits and that, with the destruction of the old Confucian hierarchy, many aspects of their religious lives are now dictated by the party-state.<sup>38</sup> Across the strait, highly educated nuns and wealthy and middle-class laywomen have been the primary participants of the Humanistic Buddhism movement in Taiwan since the 1980s. Led by the female charismatic leader Cheng Yen 證嚴, the "Mother Teresa of Asia," these nuns and laywomen have contributed significantly to the global success of Ciji gongdehui 慈濟功德會 (Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation).<sup>39</sup> Through its many disaster relief efforts and charity work in the mainland in recent years, Ciji has inspired many burgeoning mainland religious communities in their ongoing struggle for an autonomous space between a weakened party-state and an increasingly commercialized society.

All of these different areas of scholarship reflect a shared aspiration for a comprehensive field of study that is comparative, multidisciplinary, multiperspective, and cross-cultural. Seizing the momentum, in 2008 Beata Grant edited a special two-issue volume of *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* that was dedicated to the theme of women, gender, and religion in premodern China. She grouped the eight articles thematically and chronologically rather than divide them conventionally by religious traditions, and in so doing she inspired the emergence of a subfield on the study of women, gender, and religion in China.

### Revisiting Women, Gender, and Religion in China

This volume has grown out of the first International Conference on Women and Gender in Chinese Religion held at the University of Macau in June of 2011. Following the example of Grant's pioneering efforts, the nine studies included in this volume further challenge "double blindness" in Chinese gender studies and Chinese religious studies. From various "gender-critical" perspectives this volume explores previously ignored gender patterns embedded in Chinese religious life. The studies are grouped thematically rather than being artificially divided by religious traditions and span a long historical period from medieval to the present day.

To overcome "double blindness," it is crucial to focus on the "gender-critical turn" in the study of Chinese religious traditions. Over the last decade, scholars studying questions of gender in the religious traditions have repeatedly emphasized the importance of gender as an analytical category.<sup>40</sup> However, gender and religion are themselves broad categories, each of which has been endlessly questioned and discussed, and the relationship between the two is even more complicated and problematic. What this volume attempts to do is to follow several major lines of inquiry that can shed light on certain deeply embedded gender patterns in Chinese religious traditions. These lines of inquiries are reflected in the three major parts of the book.

The editors of a recent collection of studies on women and Confucian cultures in premodern East Asia note in their introduction to the collection: "In focusing on gender, our goal is to return women to the center of historical analysis. In this sense 'gender' implies a focus on 'women.' Because of a long history of neglect, we have yet to command a full picture of even the rudimentary facts about women's locations in history and society."<sup>41</sup> We,

too, fully recognize that because the study of women in Chinese religion and history is still very much in the beginning stages, women continue to be the focus of our gendering of religious studies, even though “gender is not a synonym for women.”<sup>42</sup> Placing women at the center of our analysis of gender and religion requires, in turn, exploring the formation of the female subject of religiosity and women’s agency in negotiation with religious and social norms.<sup>43</sup> One way of doing this is to recover new texts such as stele inscriptions written for women and previously ignored women’s writings, as well as to reinterpret familiar texts, through a variety of disciplinary approaches, including the literary and historical, in addition to gender and religion. This approach is reflected in the first three chapters in this volume. The authors of these studies have recovered evidence that not only helps restore women to the religious landscape but also sheds light on women’s religiosity and subjectivity and illumines their larger contributions to Chinese religious and cultural traditions.

Ping Yao’s study explores an understudied dimension of Chinese filial relationships, that of mother and daughter, and discusses how this kind of female filiality found poignant expression in Tang-dynasty (618–907) funeral inscriptions that were composed for pious Buddhist women and couched in Buddhist terms. In so doing, she demonstrates the extent to which filiality was an essential element of Chinese Buddhism rather than merely a Buddhist form of Confucian filial piety. She also shows the important role played by women in defining, broadening, promoting, and manifesting this Buddhist filiality.

Beata Grant examines what may well have been the first extant autobiographical sermon, which is found in the collected discourse records of a woman Chan master, Jizong Xingche 繼總行徹 (b. 1606), an official dharma heir of the (male) Linji 臨濟 Chan Master Wanru Tongwei 萬如通微 (1594–1657). Through a close analysis of this self-narrative, Grant demonstrates that, although Jizong Xingche adhered closely to the by then conventional template established by her male counterparts, her sermon can also be read, and was perhaps also received, as a subtle reinscription of this template. It served to authenticate and legitimate her own spiritual experience and standing in the overwhelmingly male lineage of Linji Chan masters.

Zhang Ni also provides a close reading of a woman-authored text, although one produced much later in time. The focus of her attention is the autobiographical novel *Thorny Heart* (*Jixin* 棘心) written by Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999), a celebrated female novelist who was also a self-identified Catholic. Through a comparison of this 1929 novel and its 1957 reprint,



Ni argues that Su's Catholic identity was tightly interwoven into her engagement with nationalism, Communism, and the women's rights movement. Above all, however, this novel also reflects her intellectual commitment to the restructuring of traditional Chinese religion.

A second application of the gender-critical analytic framework is to analyze the gender lenses and discourses through which religious women have been commented upon and judged, and by doing so to identify some of the overlooked gender symbols and dilemmas of religious life that often get entangled with ideology and politics. In so doing, one can shed light on the nature and significance of religious women's activities in the public sphere and their dynamic interactions with men within the gender system.<sup>44</sup> These are the approaches highlighted by the next three chapters in this volume. From three different historical periods, each of the three chapters challenges conventional lenses and theories about religious women and gender symbols and seeks to recover and redefine women's identity, agency, and tradition from the Confucian, Christian, and Communist discourses.

Jinhua Jia in her study challenges the use of the term "courtesan," which so many scholars from the Song dynasty to the present day have indiscriminately applied to Daoist priestesses of the Tang dynasty. She examines three issues relating to how Daoist women negotiated their place within the cultural-religious and socioeconomic milieu of the Tang dynasty. First, the religious practice of sexuality and other gender patterns within the Daoist tradition legitimized the love experience of priestesses and helped shape new gender relations between them and their male counterparts. Second, the priestesses empowered themselves with their considerable education and by using the cult of erotic goddesses. Finally, their independent socioeconomic status separated them from courtesans. Jia demonstrates how and why the publicly active roles of "Tang Daoist priestesses" came to be constructed and the priestesses' identity generally recognized by Tang people.

Xiaofei Kang's study of the well-known story *White-haired Girl* examines the ways in which the Communist propaganda workers in the 1940s employed gendered language to repackage traditional religious symbols in the service of mass mobilization. The ghostly features of the White-haired Girl are made to symbolize the feminized and victimized peasant class as well as the Chinese nation as a whole. In this way, her lover, a young Communist soldier who brings her out from the shadows into the sunlight, comes to symbolize the cosmic yang force representing the CCP and Mao. This highly gendered symbolism served to entrench the notion of women as recipients of revolutionary largesse over their role as subjects of the revolution.

Has Christianity offered women only a patriarchal replacement of Chinese patriarchy? What role has Christianity played in the life difficulties of Chinese women in Hong Kong who have been heir to both Christianity and Chinese culture? Wai Ching Angela Wong's study reviews these questions in light of, first, Hong Kong as a unique crossroad of Chinese and Christian cultures and, second, the transition of Hong Kong from a colonial city to that of Chinese sovereignty governed under the dictum of "One Country Two Systems." Built on interviews with over forty Chinese Christian women from various age groups and different social and economic backgrounds, an in-depth examination of six cases shows how they would exercise concrete strategies of reinterpretation of tradition and manipulation of time and space in order to cope with their respective marital and life challenges. Despite the long traditions of conservative Christian and Chinese precepts that reinforce women's submission and the priority of familial integrity, women's everyday engagement in practice necessarily brings about the possibility of agency and change.

The third part of this volume makes use of yet another approach to the study of gender and religion, which involves the question of bodies and bodily differences, and embodiment and subjectivity. In the past thirty years, scholars have paid great attention to the roles played by religious discourses and practices in "ascribing meaning to bodies and bodily differences, such as those between male and female" as well as how "cultural discourses about the body and the differences between male and female bodies impact religious rituals and, for example, the roles that men and women may assume."<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, recent theorization of religious studies has also emphasized embodied subjectivity, demonstrating how experiences and beliefs are constituted and transformed through religious practices.<sup>46</sup> The three chapters in this third part all make use of this analytic perspective of body and religion and, in so doing, paint vivid pictures of how the body and bodily differences between male and female inscribed by religious texts and cultural discourses have influenced the formation of religious practices and rituals and contributed to the construction of gendered social values, family values, and religious subjects within Chinese religious traditions both past and present.

Through a close reading of medieval Daoist texts on embryology, Gil Raz's study explores how Daoists perceived differences between male and female bodies and what these differences can tell us about Daoist perceptions of women and "femaleness." Raz discusses the fact that texts aimed at male practitioners often describe the ultimate attainment as nurturing and

then giving birth to a perfect self or a perfect embryo, which will ascend to the heavens upon the death of the gross physical body. In more complex meditative programs, the male practitioner is urged to meditate on the process of gestation and return to an embryonic stage—and then give birth to himself while avoiding the “embryonic knots” that are produced during birth by a woman and are the cause of death. Raz’s discussion confirms what some other scholars have noted as well: despite the positive valuation of yin in Daoist texts, this valuation does not carry over to actual women. In fact, the idealized process of giving birth to a perfected self is presented as a negation of the type of birthing associated with women.

Elena Valussi examines various texts of *nüdan*, or female alchemy, written by male elite scholars of late imperial China. Female alchemy first emerged in the seventeenth century and developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This textual tradition can tell us a great deal about contemporary gender notions, the understanding of the female body, and the social tensions between men and women. It also points to the desire of women for their own specialized techniques and methods of spiritual refinement as well as men’s need to continue to control these female practices. Valussi points out the final irony: while designed to teach women bodily practices for immortality, these texts by no means empower women but rather aim to contain the polluting power of the female body and the perceived danger of women in penetrating male-dominated social spaces.

The third chapter in this section, by Neki Tak-ching Cheung, examines the Jiezhu 接珠 (Receiving the Buddhist Prayer Beads) ritual that can be found today among the Hakka of southeast China. Cheung describes how rural elder Hakka women, influenced by cultural discourses about bodily differences, especially as they relate to female menopause, have created, performed, and transmitted a distinct female ritual tradition by integrating Confucian family values, popular beliefs about ritual purity, and Buddhist practices of mindful recitation. The Jiezhu ritual helps menopausal women to make critical transitions during the latter stage of their lives, to form their own social circles, and to assert status and power in their families. In particular, by both strengthening women’s attachments to husbands and sons and by reinstating connections with their natal families as well as with their married daughters, the ritual celebrates and values all aspects of a woman’s contributions as a wife, mother, and daughter.

Although the scholars represented in this volume all seek to find ways to apply gender-critical perspectives to the study of women, gender, and religion in China, they remain very conscious of the limitations of

using Western concepts of religion. Thus, rather than treating Buddhism and Daoism as alternatives to Confucian norms, as has often been the case in the past, their studies probe how ideas and practices of the “three traditions” actually serve as “repertoires of resources,” from which women in different times and circumstances selectively draw in order to construct their own traditions and identities, covering temporally from the medieval to contemporary times and spatially from metropolitan cities to rural areas.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the range and scope of these nine studies illustrate the great value of multidisciplinary and comparative approaches to discovering and interpreting sources in the study of women, gender, and religion in China. The rich sources utilized by the authors of these studies are both extensive and varied, including Buddhist scriptures and sermons, Daoist medicinal and alchemical texts, historical records, stele inscriptions, anecdotal narratives, autobiographies, poetry, novels, Communist propaganda performance, and ethnographic reports. Together they suggest both the genuine urgency for and great possibilities of more in-depth conversations among scholars of history, anthropology, and literature as well as women and gender studies and religious studies.

In addition, although the chapters are purposefully not arranged according to the conventional divisions of religious traditions, in effect these studies touch upon questions of women and gender that spring from the various Chinese traditions of Buddhism, Daoism, popular religion, and Christianity. Moreover, though our emphasis has not been on the far-better-studied area of women, gender, and Confucianism, discussions of Confucian norms and influences can be found woven through many of the studies in this volume.

In sum, based on both sides of the Pacific and coming from a wide range of research fields, the contributors of this volume utilize interdisciplinary approaches and gender-critical perspectives to furnish new understandings of gendered subject, identity, and body in Chinese religions. Overall, the volume makes two compelling 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. While each of the nine studies in the volume represents a distinct perspective on women, gender, and religion in China, together they form a coherent dialogue about the historical importance, intellectual possibilities, and methodological protocols of this subfield.

## Problems and Prospects

The present volume represents an initial attempt to open up what promises to be a field of immense possibilities. It also suggests some problems and prospects for future studies.

First and foremost, the “double blindness” referred to by Ursula King persists in the China field, especially when it comes to studies of women and gender in twentieth-century China.<sup>48</sup> In fact, this “double blindness” on the part of scholars of the twentieth century stands in stark contrast to the relatively active integration of women, gender, and religious studies in studies of traditional China on the one hand and contemporary China on the other. It is a well-known fact that the twentieth century witnessed the critical transformation and sometimes obliteration of Chinese religious traditions as secularism replaced religion as the chief identity marker of the modern citizen and the nation-state. It therefore becomes critical to ask: What happened during this period that would explain both the historical continuities as well as the creative transformations in the transmission of women’s religious traditions as they exist in today’s China? To what extent have the state’s reorganizations of the five religions and the arbitrary bifurcation of “religion” and “superstition” reshaped female religiosity and women’s constructions of religious identities in the post-Mao religious revival? How did women, especially religious women, act as agents of change to make religion relevant to China’s goal of modernization? How does gender help us understand the destruction of traditional religions and the formation of the political religiosity reflected in the Chinese Communist Party and the cult of Mao?

Addressing this double blindness in regard to twentieth-century China will also help fill other important gaps in the study of women, gender, and religion. For example, while we know quite a lot about women’s rituals and women’s participation in all sorts of religious activities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and southeast China, we know much less about their counterparts in other parts of the mainland. Similarly, while there is now excellent research on the religious history of north, northwest, and southwest China, respectively,<sup>49</sup> a fuller consideration of these histories in the context of women and gender should greatly enrich our understanding of them all.

Another area that needs to be addressed is the question of how to move beyond the recovery of women’s voices, as essential as they are, to a more gendered perspective of religion as a whole. While studies on women (lay or monastic, masters or disciples), female deities, female rituals, and

female practices have proliferated in recent years, we look forward to more theoretical, methodological, and historiographical efforts that will serve to firmly establish the subfield. In particular, we anticipate future research into the significance of the “gender-critical turn” in reshaping the structure of knowledge about Chinese religions. As some recent studies, including the chapters contained in this volume, already suggest, gender is not merely about women or about the relationship between men and women. Gender is everywhere. Its patterns are deeply embedded in all aspects of religion, and they render authority, power, and representations of self, other, age, class, and ethnicity in all religions. Gendering Chinese religions will compel us to ask new questions and perhaps even redefine what we mean by Chinese religions. If, as Company and Hymes indicate, religion is a cultural repertoire from which human beings draw, then to what extent, in any given historical circumstance, do men and women draw from this cultural repertoire differently? Do men and women draw on it differently depending on their age, class, locale, or period? If so, to what extent are their different activities subject to gendered perceptions of social roles and religious power, and how in turn do they consolidate, challenge, or resist such power? If, as a growing number of recent studies have persuasively demonstrated, it has always been community cults and local ritual traditions (rather than institutions and doctrinal teachings) that have constituted the heart of Chinese religious life,<sup>50</sup> then it would follow that such cults and rituals were essential to the defense and the reproduction of gender roles, gender relations, and gendered religious authorities in local politics, both divine and lay. Indeed, as many scholars have shown, these sorts of village rituals and community-based religious pluralism permeated all aspects of Chinese life until the twentieth century, when they came to be relentlessly attacked as “superstition” by the Chinese state as well as the cultural elite. To what extent, then, have such attacks on traditional ritual life and communal religions, as well as popular resistance to these attacks, been a gendered social and political process? In what ways have the state reorganization and control of religious expression in modern China affected gendered representations of Chinese traditional religions in contrast to those of the modern West and by extension tradition versus modernity? What have the roles of Chinese women, elite and ordinary, urban and rural, been in preserving, reinventing, or developing Chinese religions? How have the movements of women’s liberation and gender equality as well as nationalism, anti-imperialism, and Communism influenced women’s perception and rejection of, and participation in, various religious practices? While it may be impossible to answer all of these questions fully, they nevertheless suggest how a gendered approach can greatly

expand the possibilities of exploration and the potential for a deeper and more inclusive understanding of Chinese religion, history, and society.

Last but by no means least, in order to bring gender into the center of our inquiries, scholars must be trained to utilize a range of multidisciplinary and comparative methodologies. Because of the traditionally interdisciplinary nature of East Asian studies programs in North American and European institutions, China scholars are perhaps not faced with as much of an obstacle to the integration of religious studies with women's and gender studies as scholars in other areas and disciplines. Many of the authors represented in this volume, for example, work and teach across more than one department and discipline and therefore are more willing and able to engage in multidisciplinary studies. However, most universities are still divided by traditional disciplinary and academic boundaries, where women's and gender studies are represented by separate departments or programs rather than fully integrated into the various disciplines and where many religious studies faculty still feel the pressure to teach Chinese religions in terms of the traditions of "Buddhism," "Daoism," or "Confucianism," with perhaps a day or two devoted separately to the study of women and gender in these traditions.

Once scholars begin to look across disciplinary boundaries, they will have far greater chances of finding new source materials or, at the very least, discovering new topics with which to revisit familiar sources. For example, many scholars of women and gender in premodern Chinese religions have begun to look not only at the usual official documents and scriptural texts but also stele inscriptions, poetry, precious scrolls, anecdotal writings, and vernacular fiction. Although, as we can see from some of the studies in this volume, scholars of the modern period have also begun to look at religion in literary sources, efforts still must be made to bridge the period between traditional China and the modern and contemporary periods. Making the matter even more complex is that the high illiteracy rate among women in both traditional and modern rural China has greatly limited women's access to authoritative religious texts, as a result of which many laywomen past and present have transmitted (and sometimes modified and created) religious knowledge and assumed religious leadership through what they do and say/sing rather than what they read and write. An admirable model of the possibilities for addressing this is David Johnson's recent book in which he paints a rich and vivid historical picture of village ritual life in north China by weaving together ethnographic observations, early twentieth-century ritual manuals and opera scripts, and Ming-Qing gazetteers and stele inscriptions.<sup>51</sup> For this reason, it is especially important to corroborate

ethnographic research and oral literature with historical sources in uncovering women and gender in the history of Chinese religions. In short, if we are to make the “gender-critical turn,” we must embrace sources and disciplinary differences both “vertically” and “horizontally,” so as to expand the scope and depth of our inquiries.

It is our hope that scholars of women, gender, religion, history, and literature may find the research exemplified by the chapters in this volume to be relevant to their own work and that some of the methodological protocols may be of use to their line of inquiry. Above all, we hope that this volume will contribute to the further development, growth, and maturation of the subfield of women, gender, and religion in China.

### Notes

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3. Susan Calef, “Charting New Territory: Religion and ‘the Gender-Critical Turn,’” *Journal of Religion and Society* 5 (2009): 1–2.

4. Rita M. Gross, “Studying Women and Religion: Conclusions Twenty-Five Years Later,” in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Today’s Women in World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 335.

5. Jinhua Emma Teng, “The Construction of the ‘Traditional Chinese Woman’ in the Western Academy: A Critical Review,” *Signs* 22.1 (1996): 115–51. For the most representative works that contributed to these changes, see Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, eds., *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in China, 1573–1722* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

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10. See, for example, Beata Grant's series of articles and her two books, *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003) and *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); and Wendi Adamek, "The Literary Lives of Nuns: Poems Inscribed on a Memorial Niche for the Tang Nun Benxing," *T'ang Studies* 27.1 (2009): 40–65.

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Chen, "Tao as the Great Mother and the Influence of Motherly Love in the Shaping of Chinese Philosophy," *History of Religions* 14.1 (1974): 51–64.

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