

Gender and Sexuality

C. Julia Huang, Elena Valussi, and David A. Palmer

The most popular deity in the Chinese world is probably Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, or “Goddess of Mercy,” whose porcelain statues can be seen everywhere. Even where other gods or ancestors are the main objects of worship, shrines to Guanyin can typically be found as well: in temples, in small domestic shrines in homes, even in open-air altars or at the foot of sacred rocks and trees.

Guanyin means “perceiver of sounds” and refers to the deity’s ability to hear the cries of the suffering beings in this world. Guanyin is the Chinese name for Avalokitesvara, who is worshipped throughout the Buddhist world and has even been described as “the cult of half of Asia.” However, Avalokitesvara has never been worshipped as a goddess in India, Sri Lanka, or Southeast Asia. In Tibet, the Dalai Lama (always a man) is considered to be the reincarnation of Avalokitesvara. Many tenth-century paintings from Dunhuang, on the Silk Road in west China, show him with a moustache. The sexual transformation from a masculine figure to a goddess seems to be a Chinese phenomenon, and has to do with the story of Princess Miaoshan (Wonderful Goodness).¹ The story appeared as early as the twelfth century, and it goes as follows:

Miaoshan was the third daughter of King Miaozhuang (Wonderful Adornment). She was by nature drawn to Buddhism, keeping a vegetarian diet, reading scriptures by day, and meditating at night from an early age. The king had no sons and hoped to marry his daughters off, choosing an heir from among his sons-in-law. When Miaoshan reached the marriageable age, however, she refused to get married. The king was greatly angered by her refusal and harshly punished her. She was first confined to the back gardens and subjected to hard labor. But with the aid of gods, she completed her tasks. So she was allowed to go to the White Sparrow Nunnery to undergo further trials, in the hope of discouraging her from pursuing the religious path.



FIGURE 6.1 *Miaoshan transformed into Guanyin with 1000 arms and eyes. (Nie Ming/ FOTOE)*

She persevered, however, and the king burned down the nunnery, killed the five hundred nuns, and had Miaoshan executed for her unfilial behavior.

Her body, however, was safeguarded by a mountain spirit, and Miaoshan's soul descended to hell, where she saved other souls by preaching the Buddhist Dharma to them. She returned to the world, went to the Mountain of Fragrances, meditated for nine years, and achieved enlightenment.

By this time, the king had become seriously ill with a mysterious disease that resisted all medical treatment. Miaoshan, disguised as a mendicant monk, came to the palace and told the dying king that there was only one remedy that could save him: a medicine concocted with the eyes and hands of someone who had never felt anger. She further told the astonished king where to find such a person, at the Mountain of Fragrances.

When the king's messengers arrived, Miaoshan willingly offered her own eyes and hands. The father recovered after taking the medicine and came to the mountain with a royal party on a pilgrimage to offer thanks to his savior. He recognized the eyeless and handless ascetic as none other than his own daughter. Overwhelmed with remorse, he and the rest of the royal family all converted to Buddhism. Miaoshan was transformed into her true form, that of the Thousand-Eyed and Thousand-Armed Guanyin. After the apotheosis, Miaoshan passed away and a pagoda was erected to house her relics.²

This story says much about the fluid possibilities in the gender construction of divinity in Chinese culture. A masculine god can be transformed into a feminine

deity over hundreds of years. Much of the gender transformation parallels and overlaps the deity's relocation from India to China. Such transformation is done through the narrative of a female incarnation. Central to the narrative is the tension between filial piety and resistance to marriage. The dramatization of the conflict between familial duties and women's autonomy is a symbolic presentation of women's role in social reality. Religion—in this case, Buddhism—is the final resolution for a woman who could thus achieve autonomy while fulfilling filial piety.

Moving closer to the present, let us visit a township in southwestern Taiwan on a Sunday in 1997. Local lay followers of a Buddhist group, Tzu Chi (*Ciji*), are preparing for the arrival of more than fifty buses of visitors from different parts of Taiwan arriving to view the progress of a general hospital being built by their group. By 7:00 A.M., about thirty women and a few children have already shown up at the hospital construction site. Some have arrived as early as 5:00 A.M. and have been busy cooking sweet red bean soup and boiling fruit tea in the kitchen tent. Two of them frequently deliver trays filled with bowls of soup and cups of tea to the working women and warmly invite everyone present to enjoy them. About twenty women divide themselves around three round tables and start rolling dough by hand into rice cake balls.

By 8:00 A.M., several dozen men have arrived, taking on “heavy-duty” jobs, such as directing traffic and moving tables, although some just stand around chatting and admiring the hospital. A man in uniform joins one of the rice cake tables, and immediately the women start giggling and teasing him, the “single green among ten thousand reds.” Later in the morning, most of the women move to the local branch of the Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) movement. On the sidewalk in front of the premises, some women wash and chop vegetables, while others stir professional-sized woks. Men occasionally stop by in different vehicles to drop off and pick up various items. Inside on the first floor, the space usually used for meditating has been converted to a lunch box packing floor, with columns of tables standing parallel to the two side walls. Each column is an assembly line that begins with a huge pot of white rice and piles of paper boxes, and ends in front of the altar to Guanyin, with bundles of chopsticks and rubber bands for the final wrapping of each lunch box. As more and more trays of food are moved to the tables, women begin to fill each lunch box with dishes in exactly the same pattern. By 11:00 A.M., about 300 lunch boxes for the visitors are ready for the men to pick up.

This vignette is a snapshot of how women and men participate voluntarily in an event that can be called a new genre of pilgrimage—followers come to a religious site not to worship a god but to view a hospital built with their religious donations. The scale and the pace of food preparation—and the festive atmosphere—resemble events at a community temple, such as a deity's birthday, in that all participants are local and can be mobilized on short notice based on existing networks. But it is also a new kind of festival mobilization because the religious group has no local origin—it is a nationwide organization, and even a global movement. The vignette

tells us much about the division of labor along gender lines, and how a new kind of religious organization perpetuates traditional practices in public life.

The scene of the cooking team and the legend of Miaoshan illustrate the two sides of the main approaches to gender and sexuality in Chinese religions: the sociological and the symbolic. The former approaches religions in practice: the inspiration for and the regulation of social organizations, the division of labor in religious activities, and the religious source of morality, religious leadership, and religious movements. The latter focuses on religion as a symbolic construct and may look into the symbolism of rituals, deities, and myths, and the gender ideologies of different religious traditions.

This chapter considers some of the gender-specific dimensions of religious traditions in Chinese culture. It emphasizes the nuanced influences of religious ideas and practices on the roles that men and women play in public life and explains how those roles have evolved. Each major religious tradition is framed in gender-specific terms, through which the relationship between gender and religion should be understood as both symbolic constructs and social practices. We then discuss the important role of women in the revival of religions in contemporary China. The chapter concludes by considering the relationship between religion and masculinity in Chinese culture.

Symbolic Constructs and Social Practices of Gender and Sexuality

GODDESS ENIGMA: MOTHERHOOD VERSUS SEXUALITY

The pantheon of Chinese popular religion consists of territorial and hierarchical systems of masculine gods and nonterritorial exemplary popular deities. The celestial hierarchy very much resembles the ancient imperial administrative system: for example, from the top, the Jade Emperor rules over the city gods and the local earth gods, right down to the stove god, in the order of hierarchical levels from the state to the household. Just as higher level bureaucrats govern larger districts, the more exalted gods govern larger regions. Celestial bureaucrats and territorial deities—the gods worshipped in a community temple—tend to be masculine.³

Nonterritorial cults tend to focus on female and Buddhist deities. Among the popular exemplary goddesses are Guanyin, Mazu, and the Unborn Mother. These deities come from different religious traditions, but all are key figures in popular religion. We have introduced the legend of Miaoshan transforming into Guanyin at the beginning of this chapter. The leitmotif of Miaoshan's story is the resolution of the conflict between resistance to marriage and sacrificial filial piety. Similarly, the stories of Mazu and the Unborn Mother present images of femininity in which sexuality and the role of wifedom are absent. *Mazu*, literally the “mother ancestor” (also known as the Heavenly Empress [Tianhou] in Hong Kong and Guangdong), is a protector of fishermen. She is said to be the soul of Lin Moniang (“the silent lady”), who lived on Meizhou Island, off the coast of Fujian province. Lin Moniang's father and brothers were fishermen. One day when they were drowning

in a typhoon, Lin Moniang went into a trance to save her father and brothers. She succumbed to an early death after this heroic act. Her spirit continues to protect seafarers and attracts a popular cult, which by now has spread far beyond the fishing villages on Taiwan and China's Southeastern coastal region and includes Vietnam and overseas Chinese in California. Her birthday festival during the third month of the Chinese lunar calendar (between late March and early April), attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims across Taiwan who walk in a ninety-mile procession, which has become an annual multimillion-dollar media extravaganza, as well as a much contested political arena on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.⁴

Another example is the cult of the Unborn Venerable Mother. The late imperial period witnessed the spread of many popular cults with one common feature: the cult of female goddesses, and most notably the Unborn Venerable Mother. The common feature that female goddesses present is their inclusivity.⁵ Because these goddesses are symbolic mothers, they inherently have the capacity to bring their offspring together. The Unborn Venerable Mother is the ultimate mother, the first mother, mother of every other deity, including male deities. How could this better describe the concept of inclusivity? As described by the anthropologist Stephen Sangren, "female deities, unlike their male counterparts, do not favour the wealthy and influential over the poor, insiders over outsiders, or men over women."⁶

Moreover, the role of female goddesses as inclusive is implicit in the Chinese model of cosmology. If male deities are associated with hierarchy, authority, and legitimacy, it makes sense that, as Victor Turner puts it, "the sentiment of ultimate wholeness of the total community be assigned to female, especially maternal symbols."⁷ At the same time as they acquire their status as all-encompassing mothers, these women lose their specific sexual and reproductive characteristics.

In some groups, members are said to be her adopted children.⁸ She is another virginal mother to the world, carried to greater extremes than Guanyin holding a baby—the Unborn Venerable Mother literally is mother to us all, but without the pollution of actual procreation or birth. She is often portrayed as disappointed in her children, who have forgotten her and no longer follow the proper values. As one salvational text put it, "[Mother], thinking of her children with great pain and limitless sorrow, from the cool native land of utmost bliss has sent all the immortals and Buddhas to save the imperial [children] of origin. She sighs that they are lost in a 'yellow millet dream,' and in pity has descended in person to save the world, sending down from on high books written in [her] blood. . . ."⁹ This idea has occasionally provided the seed for an ideology of cataclysmic world change in millenarian sects, but in most cases it has led instead to a call for moral renewal.

The general emphasis on motherhood alongside a downplaying of sexuality is a key to popular religion's gender construct. As Sangren writes,

In sum, female purity as manifested in female deities involves the negation of woman as wife and affirmation of her role as mother (if not childbearer). In this way, Guanyin, Mazu, and the Eternal Mother each manage to embody

purely positive aspects of womanhood. Chinese conceptions of male deities, however, are more like their earthly counterparts—paternal and powerful figures to be sure, but susceptible to the foibles and foils of humanity. They may be bribed, manipulated, threatened, and cajoled. In contrast, Guanyin, Mazu, and the Eternal Mother are perfect in their generosity and purity; one need only ask with a pure heart, and all will be granted.¹⁰

However, studies of other female cults detail slightly different models of femininity from the all-inclusive nurturing mother, revealing that female deities were sometimes associated with the power of the sexual and reproductive capacities of daughters-in-law, a typical socially disruptive role.¹¹

GENDERED BODY CULTIVATION IN DAOISM

The underlying tension between a nurturing and disruptive role is also at the basis of conceptions of the role of women and the female body and sexuality in Daoism—a tradition that is often seen as having a special relation with the feminine. This notion has a long history that starts with Laozi, considered the founder of Daoism and certainly one of its most revered patriarchs to this day, and the *Daodejing*, a book in eighty-one chapters attributed to him. In the *Daodejing*, Laozi refers to the Dao as “mother” in no less than five places, and the Dao itself is often equated to a “womb” from which everything ensues and to which everything returns. Concepts like “embracing the feminine” and the preeminence of metaphors like “water,” “the valley,” and “the mysterious feminine” are found throughout the text. These notions have been used by later scholars, Chinese and Western, to explain gender relations in a Daoist context, often indicating that Daoist philosophy preferred a more feminine approach to life, practice, and conduct. However, often, the reality of gender relations in a Daoist context has differed greatly from the ideal proposed in Laozi, and scholars are too quick to equate “the feminine” with “women.” For male practitioners “embracing the feminine” meant more an exercise in balancing their inner worlds than balancing gender relations in society. Although it is certainly true that Chinese religion, and Daoism with it, is populated by a large number of female goddesses, and that these goddesses have a large number of female followers, often these goddesses, as has been explained earlier, circumvented the need for expected duties as wives and mothers by performing exceptional filial deeds in exchange for their unwillingness to marry. They are viewed and accepted as “exceptional.” The women who worship them, however, are still expected to act according to the tenets of a highly patriarchal Confucian society; thus, neither the concept of “the feminine” in Daoism nor the exceptionality of the female goddesses has an impact on the balancing of gender power in society. Therefore, when we look at the reality of Daoist women’s lives, in historical as well as contemporary terms, we need to recognize that it is influenced much more by social, political, and cultural concerns than by Daoist ideology.

The Tang dynasty was the heyday of religious activity for Daoist women. Their religiosity is described in Daoist texts as characterized by faith and reverence, usually already shown during childhood, good work, and Daoist religious observances. In terms of actual practices, we know little, but they certainly included sexual abstinence and fasting, as preliminaries to study and meditation. Meditation would in turn lead to “magical travel, visits from deities, the abilities to teach and transmit texts and liturgies, the power to perform miracles, gifts of the elixir of immortality, and the ultimate reward of eternal life and divine office.”¹²

These women’s choice to devote their life to religious pursuits, rejecting sexual activities and performing ritual fasting, can be seen as a rejection and transcendence of their female role. This leads to tensions between religious vocation and social and familial duties. Historian Suzanne Cahill describes these women as “outside the normal world and work of the Chinese woman”:¹³ most of them did not marry; others were widowed before their religious vocation manifested itself; others again, if married, managed to avoid reproduction. How, then, could they be models for female behavior? Why were their lives honored? Because they were not women any more, but symbols. By the very fact of being outside the norm, these women gave up their womanliness and became pure symbols—to be revered, but not necessarily emulated. The process of manipulation of a woman’s life story into a symbol made her example socially and morally acceptable.

A Daoist practice that several scholars have described as empowering for women is female alchemy. Female alchemy is a Daoist self-cultivation practice that developed first in the seventeenth century, flourished in the nineteenth century, and is still used widely today in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Female alchemy is similar to other kinds of Daoist self-cultivation techniques popular in China before the seventeenth century, whereby the adept undergoes a series of bodily practices in order to reach transcendence, but its peculiarity is that it is directed only at women. The tradition encompasses meditation, breathing, and massage exercises, as well as moral and ethical guidelines solely for women, taking into account the specificity of the female body, its psychological makeup, and its physiological peculiarities—first and foremost, blood. The first aim is to transform female blood into the more ethereal substance, *qi*, and then into spirit and nothingness, while at the same time the female body transforms into a less gendered, more androgynous body. The fact that this practice entails the loss of menstruation immediately reveals again the dichotomy analyzed previously between the idealized female goddess and the real woman. In this case, in order to become a transcendent, a woman has to give up her sexuality and her ability to procreate; her body loses her female characteristics, and she transcends gender. Thus, although this is a tradition for women, it does not really diverge from the notions of *yinyang*, pure/impure, female/male that subtend Chinese cosmology and that view the female as less able to achieve transcendence. The impurity of the female body stands out from the beginning, and the difficulty in getting rid of that impurity, embodied by blood, is the center of discussion of the practice. Eventually, the aim of the practice is to “change into a male body” or,

cosmologically, to create a “pure *yang*” body. Thus, for women, the meta-order is not a better balance of *yin* and *yang* elements, or a pure *yin* that would compare and contrast the “pure *yang*” meta-order of men. Female alchemy also comes with a set of moral guidelines that are very restrictive of female behavior, first and foremost the need to be practicing in the home, without contact with male teachers. Also, women of marriageable age were often discouraged from using this technique because it would create insurmountable strife within the family, since it would make the woman incapable of producing offspring. Even though these strictures have been relaxed in the present day, as we will see in the example that follows, the ideology that emerges from them tells us that this practice is steeped in the ideology current at the time of its development.¹⁴

Weng Taiming is the abbess of the Daodeyuan, a very active Daoist temple in Kaohsiung, on the southern tip of Taiwan. Weng lives there with four other adepts, and she holds regular courses for an audience of over 100 adepts. Weng was born in 1951 in a large family with three sisters and four brothers. Her father was very active in the religious community and brought her with him every time he went to a temple. Her religious interest began then and never diminished. She started meditating when she was twenty-three, and she became a vegetarian at twenty-four. She was never interested in romantic love, and she devoted her life to the practice of Daoism and internal alchemy. She studied different inner alchemical techniques with a series of Daoist male teachers. Her last teacher, also a man, taught her the principles of female alchemy. The path has been hard and long, but she has now achieved the first step of any practitioner of female alchemy: halting the menses. At the same time, she has also achieved a place of great honor and power within the Daoist religious structure, as the abbess of a very influential Daoist temple in Taiwan.

One evening, inspired by a discussion of the practice of female alchemy, she launched into a long exploration of the relationship between religious devotion and practice, and the social and familial duties of a woman. She said that a woman has first and foremost to follow her duties as daughter, wife, and mother, accommodating her desire to practice, however sincere, with the needs and expectations of her family.

Weng Taiming was using the same kind of rhetorical tools as many women had used before her, and that is very common in Chinese religious books for women. Although she herself had avoided sexual relations, marriage, and childbirth, and like the Unborn Venerable Mother was acting as an almost divine mother to her flock of adepts, she was urging the women in her audience not to upset the Confucian orthodoxy.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND CONFUCIAN GENDER ROLES

Confucian ideals define gender in familial and kinship terms. These roles and relationships are ritualized through and mutually strengthened with the patrilineal and patrilocal system, and crystallized in ancestor worship. The hierarchical dictates of patrilineal ancestor worship mean that only sons are valued because they continue

the family line and, thus, fulfill ancestral obligations. A daughter is expected to become a wife and mother of a male heir to her husband's line. When she dies, she will be worshipped as a part of her husband's ancestral line. Yet women are also viewed as the transmitters of knowledge for domestic religious practices.

It can hardly be said that Confucian patriarchy still holds sway in every aspect of social life in contemporary Chinese societies. But the primacy of the male manifests itself in many typical decisions made by families: children are more likely to take their father's surname than their mother's, even though both choices are legal; though parents may leave an inheritance to both sons and daughters, one hardly hears of cases in which all assets are left to the daughter with nothing for the son; it is common to see women who keep having children until a son is born, but it is unusual to see the opposite situation; in cases of infanticide, a baby girl is far more likely to be killed than a baby boy. The link between these choices and the patrilineal system seems rather clear. In other words, one of the most important influences Confucian ideology has on gender and sexuality has to do with patrilineality, the influences of which persist to the present day.

Ancestor worship is part and parcel of patrilineal gender ideology. When a woman dies unmarried, her soul creates a problem because it should belong to her husband's lineage; her soul should be worshipped on the same altar as her husband. Without a husband, how can her soul be taken care of? Many practices have thus come into being to provide solutions. One anthropologist found an unmarried daughter's tablet dangling, literally, below a shrine in a dark corner of her family kitchen.¹⁵ This example might be extreme, but the most common practice would be to put her ancestral tablet in a community temple or a Buddhist temple. In Jiayi (southern Taiwan), there are many unmarried daughters' tablets—crowded together with those of the unclaimed dead and the childless dead, in a side room where the Bodhisattva Dizang Wang is worshipped. The room was covered with dirt and cobwebs, and the altar for the all-too-many tablets was unkempt. Some new Buddhist temples nowadays have a bright and well-maintained worship room for this function. There are also ways to think outside the box. Anthropologists have found that things can be altered with money. An unmarried woman can leave her assets to nonkin, under the obligation of worshipping her tablet as an ancestor when she dies. A more dramatic solution is to “marry out” the unmarried woman in a so-called ghost marriage or afterlife marriage: she is “married” to the soul of a dead bachelor. Her family finds her a (deceased) fiancé and holds a wedding in which she is married to the dead man. She is then formally transferred to her husband's line.

AVENUES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MONASTIC AND LAY BUDDHISM

There is a clearly gendered division of labor in popular Chinese religious worship. Women conduct most of the daily worship of household gods and ancestors. The man's role prevails at only the most formal and important ritual occasions—funerals,

BOX 6.1 *Abortion and Fetus Ghosts in Taiwan*

It is not an uncommon practice for Taiwanese, especially women, to appease the spirits of aborted fetuses in the hope that they will cease to trouble living adults who may or may not be related to the spirit. The idea of fetus ghosts is often used by religious entrepreneurs to convince women to spend large sums of money by worshipping in temples and shrines dedicated to this purpose. And yet, it provides psychological comfort to women who have had abortions, and an avenue for dealing with grievances and family conflicts associated with the abortion.

Fetus-ghost appeasement, especially its significant rise around the 1990s, is closely tied to the reality of rapid social change under modernization. Abortion was fully legalized in Taiwan in 1985, although it was already commonly available long before the legal change. Some statistics are astonishing: for example, one-third of all pregnancies in modern Taiwan end in abortion, and perhaps half of Taiwanese women have terminated a pregnancy at least once in their lives. This is a result, argues anthropologist Marc L. Moskowitz, of “increased sexual freedom, the easy availability of abortion, and the inadequacy of sex education in at least some schools” (*The Haunting Fetus* [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001]). The propitiation of fetus ghosts, far from being ancient, is in large part something that has come to Taiwan from Japan within the past thirty years. Given the influence of Japan on popular culture in Taiwan, the transnational link is not surprising. At the same time, however, the concept of fetus ghosts resonates with a long tradition of beliefs in the personification of ghosts, the mother-son relation in Chinese Buddhism, the demonization of excessive sex, and notions of orphan souls.

jiao ceremonies of community and temple renewal (where women are usually forbidden to enter the temple), core functions of large lineages, and similar occasions. Women, however, care for the daily needs of ancestors and for most larger household rituals. Yet these are also her husband’s ancestors, and in worshipping them on her wedding day she marked the putative end of her membership in her own natal family.

This kind of daily household worship offers little more to women than housework does—perhaps the pleasure of a job well done, or the knowledge that they have contributed to the well-being of their families. Chinese popular worship has very few opportunities for roles in larger social organizations. Men dominate the local temple management committees, as well as the organizing roles in large community rituals. None of these roles offer opportunities beyond the local community. Thus, popular worship offers little to women dissatisfied with their role at home.

Buddhism, on the other hand, gives women a number of options. Women have always had the option of leaving the family to become nuns, striving for perfection by leaving the secular world and leading a life of shaved head, vegetarian diet, and celibacy. Yet this also poses problems for women. Even the phrase *leaving the family* implies its fundamental breach of filial piety: the celibate nun will neither bear sons nor care for her parents. This has historically been the greatest criticism of monastic Buddhism in China. Duty to family discouraged most women from this path at

least as much as the rigorous disciplines of the nunnery. In modern times, criticism leveled at this option is that it implies fleeing from real problems and is irrelevant to the world.

Becoming a nun was never an important option for the majority of Chinese women, but they could more plausibly consider joining lay Buddhist groups that centered around the singing of sutras. Many of these groups meet in community temples or in their own “vegetarian halls.”¹⁶ They offer women a world of their own, where they can take organizing roles, and where they can develop a Buddhist religiosity without leaving the family. They sing together, even if they do not understand the words of the sutras. Some make themselves available for hire to people who want sutras recited, especially for funeral services.

These groups offer women room for self-cultivation without the moral and personal dilemmas of becoming a nun. Their role in funerals and other services also generates a small, independent income. More important for most women, they also create a sense of accomplishment in a more public sphere to which they normally have little access. Still, such organizations exist only on a very modest scale. Furthermore, in contrast to the modern Buddhist movements described in the following section, their ties to local temples and the lack of any centralized organization leave them inherently parochial.

Women in the Revival of Religions

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant religious revival in Chinese societies. Part and parcel of the revivals is the increasing visibility of women’s participation, and, in many cases, the rise of women’s leadership and activism. This trend has been visible in Christian churches, in reformed Buddhist movements, and in traditional cults. For instance, the central role of women in the resurfacing of the Catholic Church in post-Mao China was reported in China’s national Catholic journal:

With the Lord’s grace, the embattled church [in China] again rose up. Churches everywhere were open. Priests returned to churches they had long been separated from to resume their familiar yet unfamiliar pastoral care. When religious activities first resumed, many Catholic men furtively watched from the sidelines, while the Catholic women rushed into the churches without reservation to participate heartily in the renewed services, and also encouraged other Catholics to worship in public.¹⁷

Women form the backbone of the Catholic Church; the situation is similar to that for other Chinese religions. The vast majority of worshippers in temples tend to be women. But the motives for religious participation seem to differ for men and women. For example, men also go to temples to worship, but they do so only when there are important rituals and public issues such as feuds. Women worship to pray for the recovery of sick children and for the health and tranquillity of their families.

The therapeutic dimension of women's religiosity can further be seen in the fact that most clients of spirit mediums are women. Many spirit mediums themselves are women. However, it is often issues stemming from patrilineal ideology, such as anxiety over bearing sons, that drive women to consult spirit mediums. The anthropologist Pui-an Law therefore argues that there is a reciprocal relation between the revival of folk religion and the patrilineal gender ideology.¹⁸

On the other hand, powerful female abbesses now head many Daoist temples. In a monastery on Laojunshan (Sichuan), in the mid-morning sun, two older laywomen (one the wife of a ritual master) were knitting away, very much part of the background. The abbess Zhang Zhirong, on the other hand, was discussing which talismans to use for an upcoming ritual with the ritual master. She was completely in charge. The monks and nuns at the temple watched her every move, gathering around her like a flock of chicks around their mother. As she said in an interview later, she had achieved this position of power and respect by concentrating her attention on herself, on refining her own position in the world, not by concentrating on a husband or on a family. Thus, the others now concentrated their attention on her. Negating her role as wife and mother, and the pollution inherent in the acts of sexual procreation, she became a higher mother. "In the logic of Chinese culture, escape from female pollution requires that a woman's connection with procreation be denied."¹⁹

Lately, these female abbesses, more than their male counterparts, have also been instrumental in the reconstruction of the Daoist heritage in China, which was damaged during and after the Cultural Revolution. They have been actively fund-raising and directing the restoration and expansion of Daoist temples. However, as a younger nun said in an interview, "The restoration and rebuilding of a new body of Daoist temples in the region has taken us away from refining ourselves, . . . we are putting our time into the restoration of the Daoist body in China that was so badly wounded; restoring it now means that the next generation will be able to practice."²⁰ In this case, the female body is being used to restore the nation's body. How these capable and strong-willed women at the head of Daoist temples will affect the place of women in the Daoist institutions of mainland China remains to be seen.

Traditional barriers to women pursuing the celibate path of a nun are eroding. In Taiwan, Buddhism is now characterized by the markedly increased significance and influence of nuns vis-à-vis monks. As Karma Lekshe Tsomo writes,

Although still underrepresented in male-dominated bastions of ecclesiastical power, Buddhist women in Taiwan exert their influence through material generosity and sheer numbers. A significant number have rejected marriage in favor of ordination as Buddhist nuns. Women entering monastic life outnumber men more than five to one; on the whole they are better educated, more active, and younger than male candidates, entering the order as a first option, rather than after another career.²¹

However, not all the women in the recent religious revival have confined themselves to the role of worshippers or nuns. In many areas, local Buddhist women

actively mobilize to pursue social welfare projects, such as building nursing homes.²² Perhaps the most impressive example is that of modern Buddhist organizations expanding transnationally in the global arena. The Buddhist Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) (Compassion Relief) Foundation is one of the most prominent new religious movements among Chinese-speaking people around the globe today.²³ It was founded in Taiwan in the late 1960s as a small grassroots charitable women's group, and since the late twentieth century has expanded into an international humanitarian nongovernmental organization, with branches around the world, especially where Chinese communities are concentrated, such as North America. It is a lay movement under monastic leadership in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Its core practice is "doing good" as a modern nonprofit—or to use a term more familiar to readers in North America, a *faith-based organization*—by delivering disaster relief locally in Taiwan and internationally regardless of religious and ethnic boundaries. Among the distinctive features of Tzu Chi, the most conspicuous is the charismatic leadership of its founder and leader, the Venerable Cheng Yen (or, in the group's English writings, the Dharma Master Cheng Yen).

The Tzu Chi movement is part of the broader Buddhist revival that has followed the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987. Beginning in 1966 as a small community of less than forty women in the backwaters of eastern Taiwan, Tzu Chi survived its initial difficulties, growing slowly during its first decade and then rapidly across Taiwan during the late 1980s—during a period when Taiwan was moving toward a wealthier economy and a more democratic polity. Three decades after its founding, Tzu Chi had become the largest formal voluntary association in Taiwan and a growing transnational organization among overseas Chinese. In today's Taiwan, it runs three state-of-the-art, 900-bed hospitals, a television channel, and a secular university with a respected medical school. Over the past decade, Tzu Chi has delivered relief to over thirty countries around the world. Such accomplishments have won its leader Cheng Yen several international honors.²⁴

By the year 2000, Tzu Chi claimed roughly five million followers in 117 countries. It was women who took the initiative for localizing Tzu Chi transnationally. Until recently, women have been underrepresented in most overseas Chinese organizations,²⁵ except for some vegetarian associations and salvational societies in Singapore, which had therefore been characterized and looked down upon as "women's religions."²⁶ As with its growth in Taiwan, women continue to play a pivotal role in Tzu Chi's overseas development. The four branches studied by Julia Huang—New York, Boston, Malacca, and Tokyo—began with women's efforts; and their original image as a women's group did not hinder the organization from developing either locally or globally. The significance of this gender aspect lies in its confirmation that Chinese women are not socially inept, but endowed with the informal ties needed to mobilize civic associations.²⁷

 BOX 6.2 Homosexuality and Buddhism

Gays and lesbians are called *tongzhi*, “comrade,” in Taiwan and mainland China. The term became popular in the 1980s, when Taiwan was moving from the Cold War to democratization. Similar to the gay and lesbian movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, the gay rights movement in Taiwan has political roots. But unlike its Western counterparts, the gay movement in Taiwan associated itself not with civil rights, but with the political opposition party. Six years after the founding of the first secular homosexual (lesbian) group, the first homosexual church was founded in 1996 by a female Presbyterian pastor.

Six months later, the first gay Buddhist group, the Child-Brahman Abode, was formed. Unlike the church and the global gay and lesbian movements, the Child-Brahman Abode is not politicized, if not depoliticized. Yang Huinan argues that the two leaders of the gay Buddhists represent two stages of the gay and lesbian movements: one is to assure dignity and self-respect for the members, and the other is to actively pursue rights and make waves in the larger society. According to Yang’s online survey, the two core issues deemed relevant by the members concerned are as follows: all beings are equal for attaining enlightenment, and the question of whether homosexual practice violates Buddhist precepts (Huinan Yang, *Ai yu xinyang: taiwan tongzhi fojiaotu zhi pingquan yundong yu shengceng shengtaixue* [Love and Faith: The Taiwan Gay Buddhist Rights Movement and Deep Ecology] [Taipei: Shangzhou Press, 2005]).

Conclusion: Chinese Religion and Masculinity

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Chinese *yin/yang* cosmology ascribes a gendered symbolism to all the beings, forces, and tendencies in the universe. It is an ambiguous cosmology that, on the one hand, gives an equally fundamental and interdependent role to both the masculine and feminine dimensions of being, but, on the other hand, tends to ascribe primacy to one of the two—usually the masculine *yang*, but, as we have seen, in Daoist texts the feminine *yin* is often symbolically privileged. Chinese religious practices combine this ambivalent cosmological symbolism with a social structure that was unabashedly patriarchal until the modern era, and continues to be so in many aspects of social life.

This chapter has shown how, in Chinese religious culture, goddesses and women have symbolically transcended the tensions inherent in their social roles, exploring and transforming aspects of their gendered identity while respecting, and even reproducing, the patriarchal social structure. Our discussion has focused on women and femininity; however, the converse can also be said of men and masculinity.

The Confucian affirmation of a patriarchal and patrilineal social structure appears to need little elaboration. However, the ethical teachings of Confucius and Mencius on the proper attitudes and dispositions of the “sage” or “gentleman” offer an alternative model of masculinity to many of the fierce gods and guardians often encountered in Chinese temples. As a result, modern interpretations of

Confucianism often downplay the patriarchal ideology, and China's most popular contemporary proponent of Confucianism, the best-selling author Yu Dan, is a woman—to the dismay of the (mostly male) academic experts on Confucianism!

Indeed, a conceptual distinction is often made between the “civility” of the Confucian scholar and the “martiality” of the warrior—the priest of exorcistic battles against demons, and the martial artist of the rivers and lakes, described in the previous chapter. The martial arts tradition, which is based on Daoist body cultivation techniques, provides a model of masculine strength, virtuosity, loyalty, and chivalrous morality through the cultivation and control of *yin* and *yang* energies. In this tradition, the ideal image of masculinity combines the heroic power and virtue of the warrior with the cultured civility and wisdom of the sage. (In modern times, the image of the female martial artist has become more widespread, as exemplified in the recent films *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. This image is not new, however, and dates back to the centuries-old tale of Mulan, made into a Disney animated film in 1998.)

Just as feminine alchemy hinges on the use of meditative techniques to stop the loss of bodily fluid through menstruation, Daoist body cultivation for men (called “inner alchemy”), in its more advanced stages, requires controlling and ending seminal emission. Semen is considered to contain the essence of life, and its leakage depletes vitality and shortens the life span. Body cultivation techniques begin with enhancing potency while controlling ejaculation. The sexual energy is then supposed to be converted through meditation techniques into *qi* and then into spirit. A tradition of sexual practices, known as “dual cultivation,” is designed to train men and women to jointly engage in alchemical meditation through sexual practice.

These techniques have spread both in the popular culture and in Daoist spiritual discipline, but with different goals. In Chinese erotic novels and manuals on the “arts of the bedchamber,” “dual cultivation” is presented primarily as a form of exercise to benefit health and promote longevity through the proper cultivation of vital essence and energies.²⁸ But it also becomes a technology for enhancing masculine prowess: through his ability to control ejaculation, the male can engage in intercourse with a consecutive succession of partners, absorbing their *yin* energies while keeping his *yang* to himself.²⁹ The famous Daoist scholar Kristofer Schipper has commented that the obsession with avoiding depletion of vitality through emission of semen reveals a fear of feminine power in the sexual act.³⁰ In Daoist spiritual discipline, on the other hand, dual cultivation gradually became fully internalized—instead of practicing with a sexual partner, the adept was to become a celibate monk and conjoin the *yin* and *yang* energies within his own body. The state of “pure *yang*” to which he aspires is a purely spiritual one. In the process of transforming himself into an ethereal body and, like a pregnant mother, nurturing an “immortal embryo” in his abdominal area, not only does his seed stop “leaking,” his “turtle head” shrinks, and he squats like a woman to urinate, until he becomes, like the woman practitioners of feminine alchemy, a purely androgynous being.³¹

Notes

1. Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1–2, 293–351.
2. Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 293–294.
3. Arthur Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, Ancestors,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur Wolf (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–182.
4. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, “Goddess across the Taiwan Strait: Matrifocal Ritual Space, Nation-State, and Satellite Television Footprints,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 209–238.
5. Steven Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the ‘Eternal Mother,’” *Signs* 9.1 (1983): 5–25.
6. Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols,” 15–16.
7. Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols,” 16–17.
8. Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols,” 10.
9. David K. Jordan and Daniel Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 262–263.
10. Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols,” 14.
11. Kenneth Pomeranz, “Power, Gender and Pluralism in the Cult of the Goddess of Taishan,” in *Culture and State in Chinese History, Conventions, Accommodations and Critiques*, ed. Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 182–206.
12. Suzanne Cahill, “Practice Makes Perfect: Paths to Transcendence for Women in Medieval China,” *Taoist Resources* 2, no. 2 (1998): 28.
13. Cahill, “Practice Makes Perfect,” 38.
14. For a general introduction to female alchemy, see Elena Valussi, “Women’s Alchemy: An Introduction,” in *Internal Alchemy: Self, Society, and the Quest for Immortality*, ed. Livia Kohn and Robin Wang (Dunedin, Fla.: Three Pines Press, 2008). For a discussion of its historical development, see Valussi, “Female Alchemy and Paratext: How to Read Nüdan in a Historical Context,” *Asia Major* 21, no. 2 (2008), 153–193.
15. Emily Martin Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973).
16. Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 45–46.
17. Eriberto P. Lozada, Jr., *God above Ground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 102.
18. Pui-lan Law, “The Revival of Folk Religion and Gender Relationships in Rural China: A Preliminary Observation,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 64 (2005): 94.
19. Sangren, “Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols,” 10.
20. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Mahaprajapati’s Legacy: The Buddhist Women’s Movement: An Introduction,” in *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 20.
21. Keping Wu, “Grassroots Religious Mobilization and Social Change in Southeast China: The Strategies of Two Popular Buddhist Communities.” Unpublished manuscript.
22. The formal name of the organization in English, Tzu Chi (*Ciji*), literally means “Compassion Relief.” Names that appear on the organization’s website are given in Wade-

Giles Romanization, and this is followed here: Tzu Chi (the organization) and Cheng Yen (leader of the organization).

23. David W. Chappell, "Introduction," in *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*, ed. David W. Chappell (Somerville, Mass.: Wisdom, 1999), 15–25.

24. Edgar Wickberg, "Overseas Chinese Organizations," in *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Richmond, England: Curzon, 1999), 83–91.

25. Maurice Freedman and Marjorie Topley, "Religion and Social Realignment among the Chinese in Singapore," *Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1961): 3–23, 22.

26. Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999).

27. Daniel Reid. *The Tao of Health, Sex and Longevity: A Modern Practical Guide to the Ancient Way* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

28. See R. H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China: A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.*, Sinica Leidensia Series, Vol. LVII, updated ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic, 2003).

29. Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

30. Adeline Herrou, "Daoist Monasticism at the Turn of the 21st Century: Ethnography of a Quanzhen Community in Shaanxi Province," in *Daoism in the Twentieth Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, ed. David, David A. Palmer and Xun Liu, 2011 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). See also Herrou, *La vie entre soi* (Nanterre, France: Société d'ethnologie, 2005).