

Female Rituals and Female Priestly Roles in

by Jordan Paper

Cet article examine l'apparent équilibre entre les rôles masculins et féminins dans les rites chinois tout en expliquant comment les perspectives androcentriques et ethnocentriques contribuent à une interprétation impérialiste de la religion chinoise.

When non-western religions are perceived through cultural blinders, female activities are filtered out. Virtually all western descriptions of Chinese religious practices describe only male roles.

The study of religious traditions other than our own is a western endeavour, for only western cultures understand religion as a phenomenon separable from culture. In these comparative religious studies, it is common to find western cultural expectations determining the way other traditions are depicted. The androcentric values and misogynist perceptions that underlie western religions have informed our understanding of religion in general and form the framework of social-scientific approaches to the study of religion. For example, the sacred-profane dichotomy of Christianity lies at the heart of one influential theory of the evolution of religion. To this dichotomy sex was crucial: the sacred domain is understood to be exclusively male, while females are linked and limited to the profane. Accordingly, when non-western religions are perceived through these cultural blinders, female activities are filtered out, because, by definition, female activities cannot be religious. Hence, it is hardly surprising that virtually all western descriptions of Chinese religious practices to date describe only male roles.

The question before us is whether these descriptions are accurate; that is, in this regard, was Chinese religion similar to western traditions until recently, or do these descriptions marginalize or utterly ignore female religious roles in Chinese religion? On the one hand, not only are Chinese family and society patrilineal and patrilocal, but so is Chinese religion, since it centres on the family. Moreover, traditional Chinese government was patriarchal, given that the civil-service bureaucratic positions developed from hereditary military ones. On the other hand, Chinese ideology is based on the complementary relationships of equal opposites, including gender/sex, such as *yin* and *yang*, and the various realms of the spiritual equally include female and male spirits: the ancestral spirits are equally male and female; cosmic spirits focus on

the interrelationship of complementary equals, such as the female Earth and the male Sky; and the deities include both genders—indeed, the most important popular deities are female, including a creator deity. Hence, the seeming lack of female religious roles is most anomalous.

When one reads the Chinese ritual texts, however, the anomaly disappears, for, as with all aspects of Chinese culture, male and female rituals and ritual roles are similarly balanced. Of life-cycle rituals of the past, the male capping ceremony, which marks the transition from childhood to adult status for elite males, is often cited as an example of the male orientation of Chinese religion. Yet, the ritual texts clearly describe a complementary hair-pinning ritual for elite females that took place at the same age as the male ritual and had an identical purpose, although, to the best of my knowledge, hitherto there was not a single western writing on traditional Chinese religion that mentioned it.

Chinese religion focusses on sacrificial rituals, sacrifices primarily directed towards the dead of the family. The Chinese focus on balance, particularly gender/sex balance, requires equal participation of males and females in these sacrifices. This was so important that it was the theoretical purpose of marriage, at least from the standpoint of religion. In the *Liji*¹ ("The Ritual Record" composed over two thousand years ago), we find the following passage:

Kongfuzi (Confucius) said: The head of the clan, even if seventy years of age, must not be without a principal wife [to carry out the rituals].

In the same text, a prince on asking for a consort from another prince is to make the request as follows: "I request the ruler's elegant daughter to share my poor state, to serve in the ancestral temple and at the Altar to Soil and Grain." The passage goes on to elucidate the sacrificial duties of husband and wife, constantly alternating their respective preparation for and activity in the sacrificial rites.

According to the *Liji*, the essential gender balance of the sacrificial celebrants models cosmic patterns:

The celestial movements provide teachings.... [At the sacrifices,] the ruler is at [the top] of the steps [of the eastern hall]; the principal wife is at the [most western] chamber. The Great Brightness (Sun) comes up in the east; the Moon comes up in the west. This is the differentiation of Yin and Yang and the principle of husband and wife. The ruler [facing west] offers wine in a vessel decorated with an elephant (a symbol of male fecundity: sun and thunderstorm), the wife [facing] east offers wine in a vessel [decorated with

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clouds and mountains] (female symbols: earth)....
Thus, harmony is achieved.

Throughout the descriptions of the details of the sacrificial rituals, female and male activities are balanced and reciprocal. For some rituals, the ruler and his spouse,

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together with male clan members and their wives, and the higher officials and their wives carry out the various procedures in the sacrificial hall or at various altars. For other rituals, the ruler is in the clan ancestral temple, which is just outside the palace, while his consort is carrying out similar rituals in the inner chamber, modelling the practice and theory that males concern themselves with outer affairs, that is, matters outside of the household, while females concern themselves with inner, household, affairs.

The contemporaneous *Yili* text, which is written in more mundane prose and concerned with the details of the practices of the ordinary elite, confirms that the above descriptions were not just theoretical ideals. In describing the different sacrifices, in every case, there are parallel offerings, with the same ritual, by the wife of each celebrant. And when the wife pours wine for the celebrant to drink, the husband then pours wine for his wife to drink.

This text also clarifies the banquet that follows the ancestral sacrifices, where the living of the family eat the sacrificial food and drink the wine after the spirits have taken their fill. Western scholars have read the sacrificial odes of the earlier *Shi* (Odes) to the effect that only the men took part in the this feasting and drinking. The *Yili* makes clear that, while the clansmen and their guests feasted in the outer hall, their wives were feasting in the inner, female chambers.

In examining Zhu Xi's *Jiali* (*Family Rituals*) of a thousand years later, we find little change in the overall understanding of gender roles in sacrificial rituals. Both in the offering hall and at the grave site, males and females place themselves respectively to the east (the direction of sunrise) and the west (direction of sunset). Rituals are presided over by the appropriate male and his wife, who each perform virtually the same rituals. One interesting

change is due to the influence of Buddhism, aspects of which by this time were amalgamated into Chinese religion. As Buddhists avoided alcoholic beverages, tea became a popular drink. In the Song dynasty sacrifices, we find men offering wine and women offering tea. Spirit tablets (names of the deceased placed on the altar) are kept for both female and male ancestors to five generations, and women handle the spirit tablets of females and men those of males.

The two most important roles in earlier sacrificial rituals were the person offering the sacrifice, the Descendant, and the person who is possessed by the ancestral spirit to whom the sacrifice is offered and drinks the wine and eats the food, the Incorporator of the Dead. The latter was, for all intents and purposes at the time of the sacrifice, the honoured dead. Since these ritual texts are written by and for males, the Descendant and the Incorporator of the Dead are, when gender is mentioned, almost always referred to as male. Fortunately, there is one passage in the *Liji*, which, in describing how a female is to receive a gift from a ruler, also outlines the behaviour she is to use when serving as an Incorporator of the Dead, as well as the circumstances in which she would be in this ritual role.

The strict separation of the sexes required that an elite individual of one sex not be possessed by an ancestor of the opposite sex, nor would a person of one sex be the chief celebrant in the sacrifice to an ancestor of the other sex. When an ancestral sacrifice was to be held, the son of the deceased male or the daughter-in-law of the deceased female, with a specialist in divination, divined the appropriate day for the fast. During the preparations leading up to the sacrifice, including extended fasting and meditation, the Descendant, with other members of the family, divined which grandson or granddaughter-in-law should become the Incorporator of the Dead. One can but assume that during the sacrifice, as the wife supported the husband in his role of Descendant, so the husband supported his wife when she took on the role of Descendant.

There are other situations, mentioned in the *Liji*, in which a female would preside at sacrificial rituals. If there were no son, an unmarried female would preside at the funeral and subsequent sacrifices of her mother or father. Also the ritual of the ruler ploughing the first furrow in the spring at the altar to the first agriculturist was paralleled by the ruler's wife carrying out a spinning ritual at the altar to the first sericulturist (producer of silk).

The palace staff included female ritual specialists to assist the high-status women in carrying out their duties. These female ritualists seem to have been shamans and/or mediums, as they also functioned as exorcists to rid the inner chambers of any evil emanations and to drive away

calamities, and they were to be able spiritually to create a felicitous atmosphere. Government officials included females who had important religious roles as mediums between the realm of spirits and deities and humans. Not only did they offer themselves to be possessed by these spirit beings so that they could speak to and heal humans, but these same individuals performed priestly roles as exorcists and purification specialists. They were in charge of removing negative influences. In times of drought, they called down rain with special ritual dances. When the Queen made a visit of condolence, they walked in front of her with a male ritual specialist. When there was a great calamity, they chanted, cried, and supplicated the spirits. While these mediums were predominantly female, males also served in these functions.

About a thousand years ago, Chinese social theorists became increasingly concerned about the breakdown in cultural values and social structures with a shift to an urban culture, concerns generally similar to those expressed in the twentieth-century West. A slowly adopted solution was to reinforce the concept that the female role was in the interior of the home and the male role exterior to the home. Foot-binding was fostered (but not started) by the most important theorist; women were no longer offered governmental appointments as mediums; and wives seemed to function less as advisors to husbands who were officials.

At the same time, the intellectuals, while adopting many religious practices of the general population, also regarded many other religious practices as superstition. Particularly those religious roles which involved ecstatic behavior were looked at askance. The role of the Incorporator of the Dead (possession by the ancestral spirits in order to eat the food and drink the wine of the sacrifice) in which both males and females served, was dropped from the ritual. Non-family mediums tended to be considered charlatans by the intellectuals, who controlled government policy on this matter. Hence, mediums lost social status, and, over time, women were forbidden to practice outside the home, although many continued to do so to the present.

These policies were continued by modern governments. However, the ending of martial law in Taiwan and increased freedom of traditional religious practices on the Mainland in the late 1980s has led to an enormous increase in public functioning by mediums, particularly female mediums. In Taiwan, mediums formed a modern society offering professional certification and a college. Within a year of its formation, two thousand mediums, predominantly women, were listed as members.

Often with limited education, but some from middle-class homes, these women gained self-esteem and public functions that had not been available to them for literally a millennium. Obviously the knowledge had not been lost during this period of time or else so many could not have so readily taken on these roles. These extrafamilial roles can raise problems for families. Often these women will be away from their homes for days at a time, leaving young children in the care of their husbands, and, as they do not

accept payment for their services, their expenses can be a drain on the family economy. But as one husband said to me, "She is my wife (what can I do?)," belying the western misperception of female subjugation in China.

In the supplementary religious traditions as well, women played important and relatively equal roles to males. Chinese Buddhist nuns had equal roles to monks, different from the southern Buddhist traditions, and many, certainly the majority of those for whom we have biographies, were literate and educated in the sutra (Buddhist sacred texts) tradition.

Women served as Daoist priests, and some became noted adepts. Prior to the last few centuries, Daoist rituals required an equal number of male and female officiants, husbands and wives who were Daoist priests held the same ranks, and the transmission of office could be patrilineal or matrilineal. Initiation to the exalted rank of Master was for a married couple, not an individual, and consisted of an elaborate ritual involving the relationships between the female and male on an equal basis. Hence, the Daoist rituals and ritual roles, with regard to gender, were similar to the imperial ones and accorded with Chinese ideological principles.

Over the last few centuries, women had equal roles to men in popular religious movements; women served as heads of congregations, military leaders, and teachers of both males and females. Today in Taiwan, new religious sects are constantly arising, usually based on visions and dreams, and women are very active as founders and leaders, as well as a substantial part of the congregations.

Androcentrism in western studies of Chinese religion has far from disappeared. My recent publications on these themes have met criticism as being misleading if not simply incorrect, but none of these critiques have challenged my use of Chinese texts or my observations of contemporary Chinese culture. Obviously, correct interpretation in the scholarly world need not be based on a correct reading of data. Androcentric readings of Chinese religion continue to appear. One relatively recent article in English by a feminist Chinese scholar capitalized the "H" in Heaven (Sky), but not the "E" of the equal Earth; a recent English language book on Chinese religion by a female Chinese scholar devotes a separate chapter of a few pages to women, in effect, declaring women to have marginalized, minor roles in Chinese religion.

In summary, what I am suggesting here is that we should not believe what most westerners, or, for that matter, what western-assimilated Chinese write about Chinese religion when it comes to gender/sex. The importance of maintaining the purity of an androcentric orientation in religious-studies scholarship continues to win out over the facts. Furthermore, it is simpler to read western patriarchy into other cultures than to actually try to understand the complexity of gender/sex relationships that can differ considerably between cultures. The primary criticism of western feminists by Chinese feminists is that they force their ethnocentric western understanding of patriarchy on

the interpretation of Chinese culture, a practice that amounts to cultural and religious imperialism.

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¹The *Liji*, *Yili*, *Jiali*, and *Shi* are among the texts of the classics. All translations by author.

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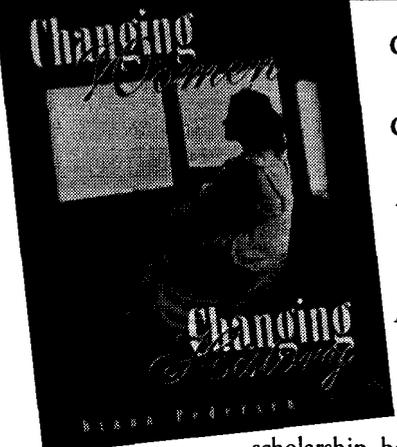
JULIE ANDRES

Alive

When the earthly urges stream
Through cracks in my cathedral
I ask that my desire not be fulfilled too soon.

Julie Andres earned her BA in depth psychology last year from Antioch University, Seattle. She writes fiction and poetry and works from her home on Bowen Island, BC.

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