

WOMEN AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETIES

beyond Han patriarchy

Featuring a preface by Rubie S. Watson
edited by Shanshan Du and Ya-chen Chen



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Women and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Societies

Preface

Women and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Societies contains a diverse collection of essays analyzing significant changes in Chinese gender relations. There are excellent discussions of China's National Minorities including the Lahu, Zhuang, De'ang, Dai, and Yi. Two of the chapters locate their analysis in Taiwan and two focus on Han populations in Huhhot and Liaoning. Symbolism, religion, kinship, marriage, family, ethnicity, representations, feminism, film, and fiction are the domains within which gender change and continuity are analyzed.

Five of the eleven chapters are devoted to discussions of the impact of National Minority policies on gender and family relations. From Du, we learn that collectivization and market reforms have played a prominent role among the Lahu. During collectivization close, dyadic relationships among married couples were weakened as work tasks were removed from the household context, a new sexual division of labor was imported, and local ritual and religious practices were attacked. Since the 1980s, Lahu families have enjoyed a series of cultural revivals and a restoration of household-based economic activity; but, not surprisingly, Lahu lifeways have not returned to their pre-Mao forms. The expansion of the market economy including extensive out migration has brought new pressures on family relations, and contribute to a historic high rate of what Du calls "love-suicides;" which, Du argues, can be traced to Post-1949 destabilizations of Lahu institutions that supported egalitarian conjugal bonds.

Many authors in this volume take up the impact of changing religious practice, expression, and belief on gender relations and ideology. Wilkerson notes that "egalitarian reciprocity" between husbands and wives is central to Zhuang religious traditions, but Taoism as well as Chinese state policies have contributed to forms of androcentrism with which Zhuang must contend. In a fascinating account of a single ritual, Wilkerson documents the negotiations that are necessary and the conflicts that arise as a female ritual specialist insists on participating in a large community ceremony. In a similar vein, arguing from De'ang ethnography, Du sees male dominance rooted in an imported Theravada Buddhism, which embeds women's subordination in the village *sangha* and constrains women's temple activities. Again, like the Lahu and Zhuang, we find

a negotiated but yet contested realm within which different gender ideologies and practices struggle for precedence.

In her chapter devoted to a community of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, Crane describes a group of women who are bent on “overcoming” their status as women. They accomplish this task by the seemingly unlikely combination of exaggerating those negative aspects of women, which limit a woman’s capacity for spiritual cultivation, and by claiming male status. A claim, which is possible, they believe, because, as nuns, they are free from the constraining familial roles that other women must endure. Crane provides an intriguing discussion of what she refers to as a “correlative gender model” in which gender is “related (but not affixed) to the sex of one’s body.” In availing themselves of this conceptual apparatus, this small group of nuns are able to present themselves as men.

Using the concept of official and practical kin, Liu argues that heroin addiction among the Nuoso (Yi) is being tackled by groups of kin in which “the power of maternal relatedness” plays an important role. In a vividly dramatic account, Cable turns our attention to the impact of tourism on Dai notions of propriety. In their staged portrayals of Dai marriage ceremonies for tourist *yuan* (Chinese currency), young women present themselves (and Dai customs) in ways that are at odds with local cultural norms. In stark form, we see the kinds of compromises that many national minorities must make as they try to commodify ceremonies, attract tourists, and yet remain true to a moral order that seems increasingly unattainable. Her ethnographic account is moving as it chronicles Dai attempts to draw boundaries between what “we perform for tourists and what we do for ourselves.” In the example that Cable discusses, Dai identity is created, changed, and negotiated in the interplay between Han tourists and national minority performers within the context of deeply gendered and commodified representations of ethnicity.

Two chapters by Shi and Jankowiak deal with changes among Han families in a Liaoning village and in the city of Hohhot. Taking up the important topic of China’s notorious sex-ratio imbalance, Shi argues that young village women exercise considerable decision making power in marital choice, divorce, residence, and reproductive decisions. The costs of marriage to grooms and their families are very steep and divorce is greatly feared by husbands and their parents.

Jankowiak makes the important point that bonds of sentiment are increasingly important in linking family members together. He is especially interested in changes in father-child relations. Although he reports a “lack of cultural consensus” on exactly what good parenting should be, there is a decided trend, he argues, for fathers to be more involved and nurturing than in the past. There is no doubt that the whole realm of parenting, especially as it relates to fathers, is changing dramatically as the impact of the single child family sinks more and more deeply into Han Chinese lifeways.

In her chapter on protest in the 1920s, Tao reminds us that women have been active in attacking China’s double standards of sexual morality for a very long time. She describes the outcry that met the appearance of nude women in

The International Women's Day parade in 1927. Tao's discussion proves the point that extreme acts can bring to the light of day tensions that usually remain submerged. Tao provides a good discussion of attitudes toward women's bodies during a period of considerable social upheaval.

Two chapters devoted to what Chen calls Chinese "cinematic martial arts feminism" and the Taiwan-based novelist Li Ang explore fictional representations of women, women as represented in the artists' imaginaries. Chen asks why on the one hand independent, strong-willed film heroines in *Crouching Tiger*, for example, must end their lives in self sacrifice and often death. She finds her answer in the male dominated industry that has a limited and limiting vision of what women can do.

Rubinstein's discussion of Li Ang presents us with important insights not only into Li Ang's fiction and her dedication to women causes, but he deftly places her work in time and place. We learn that Li Ang is both social reformer and artist.

This volume provides welcome new perspectives on the ways in which China's gender attitudes and gender relations have changed. Whether the discussions concern nude women protestors, Taiwanese nuns, religious devotees, or performers of National Minority tableau, this volume opens up, as editor Du points out in her Introduction, a multi-ethnic approach to Chinese women. There is no doubt that readers will be glad of this opening.

Finally, it is important to note that we have come a long way from the days when our understanding of Chinese family relations and gender rested on an edifice of ethnographic research in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Location and time period are important. In anthropology, we are to some degree captives of where we do our research, with whom, and when. One of the important contributions of this volume is the way that Du, Chen, and their colleagues show us that there are indeed many "families" in contemporary China.

Rubie S. Watson

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Introduction: Toward Multiethnic Approaches to Women and Gender in Chinese Societies

By Shanshan Du

Studies of women and gender in China have been increasingly explosive since the 1980s. Recent attention to historical, geographic, and class differences in particular has expanded our understanding of the diversity and complexity of gendered China. Nevertheless, the ethnic dimension of this subject matter remains largely overlooked, particularly concerning women's conditions and gender status. The tendency to neglect this dimension is deeply-rooted in the long-enduring convention found in Chinese studies, or sinology, which tends to utilize the broad concept "Chinese" to refer to the Han, i.e., the ethnic majority in China and the largest ethnic group in the world (Ebrey 1996). Consequently, Han patriarchy and its oppression of women are often inaccurately or erroneously associated with the whole gendered heritage of China, epitomized by the infamous traditions of footbinding and female-infanticide.

Such academic and popular predisposition belies the fact that China has been multiethnic throughout its long history and ethnic minorities have greatly contributed to both the identity and cultural heritage of "the Chinese" (Rawski 1996, Mueggler 2001:19-20). To date, many ethnic minorities continue to maintain their socio-cultural distinctiveness to varying degrees, in spite of the extraordinary assimilating power of Confucianism and the Han kinship system in pre-modern China (Ebrey 1996) and different strands of modern nationalism (Harrell 1995, Leibold 2007, Mullaney 2011). Corresponding to the immense socio-cultural diversity in Chinese societies, gender systems span a wide spectrum, ranging from extreme Han patriarchy to Lahu gender-egalitarianism (Du 2000, 2002, 2004, 2009). In this sense, scholarship in China Studies and beyond has been limited by the persistent neglect of ethnic diversity in mainstream representations of Chinese women and gender. This tendency inadvertently perpetuates, if not reinforces, a distorted understanding of China as homogeneously Han and Chinese women as uniformly suffering under patriarchy.

The authors contributing to this book have collectively initiated a systematic effort to bridge the gap between understanding the majority Han and ethnic minorities in regard to women and gender in contemporary Chinese

societies. While I had long hoped for multiethnic approaches to the subject, the inception of the theme of this book was derived from a productive conversation in 2008 with Paul H. Tai, the then-newly-elected president of the American Association of Chinese Studies (AACS). Responding to his enthusiastic encouragement for a greater anthropological presence at the next AACS annual conference, I proposed a panel composed of myself and the ethnographers with whom I was then working closely—Monica Cable, Hillary Crane, William Jankowiak, and Lihong Shi. During her academic visit to Tulane University in early 2009, Ya-chen Chen and I decided to collaborate and co-organize a double-session panel, to which she also brought on board Murray Rubinstein and Chia-Lin Pao Tao, who jointly enriched the project with the additional perspectives of history, literature, and film studies. With the addition of three more anthropologists (Shao-hua Liu, Rubie S. Watson, and James Wilkerson), this book is an extension of that panel (“Diversity, Transformation, and Resistance: Gendered Institutions and Practices in China”), which was presented at the 52nd Annual Conference of the AACS in October 2009, in Orlando, Florida.

In order to “ethnicize” the term “Chinese,” I will insert “Han” in parentheses throughout the following discussions when relevant literature directly or indirectly uses the word “Chinese” or “China” to address issues exclusively or primarily concerning the Han Chinese. For the purpose of facilitating effective dialogues between sinology and minority studies, however, the remainder of this chapter will not delve into the contested nature of such key concepts as “woman” (Barlow 1994, 2004:37-63) and ethnic categories in China (e.g., Gladney 2003:20-23, Harrell 2001, McKhann 1995, Mueggler 2001: 7-8, Mullaney 2011). Due to the overwhelming amount of publications on the subject and the space limitations of this Introduction, I will examine only the most relevant English literature and a few written in Chinese. Conforming to the Romanization conventions for particular Chinese concepts and names, *pinyin* and Wade-Giles are used in this chapter and throughout the book.

Patriarchal Gender System among the Han

In addition to its prevailing gender ideology promoting male superiority and dominance, the heritage of Han patriarchy is also structurally undergirded by its patrilineal kinship system and social organization (E.g., Cohen 1990, Faure 2007, Freedman 1958, Watson 1982, Wolf 1968). In spite of its internal diversity and dynamics, the traditional gender system among the Han provides a classic example of patriarchy, gender hierarchy, and women’s oppression.

Male superiority and dominance characterize the gender ideals of Confucianism, the prevailing Han worldview and state-orthodoxy throughout Imperial China. The codification of female inferiority is strikingly illustrated by a remark of Confucius in *The Analects* 《论语·阳货》 that “only women and

petty men are the most difficult to deal with” (唯女子与小人为难养也). This statement stratifies women along with, yet beneath, “petty men,” who represent the antithesis of the noble character of “gentlemen” (君子). Since the term “gentlemen” stands for the Confucian moral ideal of humanity, women are thereby degraded to the ultimate moral “Other,” or a level of sub-human being. Women’s submission to men is also rigidly delineated in the Confucian moral code of “three bonds and five relationships” (三纲五常 Tu 1998:121-136), particularly “women’s trice obedience” or “three followings” (三从 *ibid.*:123), i.e., being obedient to (or following) the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son after the death of her husband. The *Five Classics* of Confucian doctrines depicts a non-submissive wife to illustrate the moral lesson that “if the hen crows in the morning, the household will be desolated” (Guisso 1981: 55). In a modern rural context, (Han) women are still symbolically represented as being polluting and dangerous, a notion rooted in their presumed “unclean substances and their connection with birth and death” (Ahern 1975: 193).

While male-dominance constitutes an integral part of hierarchy-based Confucianism, an overall egalitarianism characterizes Daoism and Buddhism, the two other prominent philosophical strands in China’s long history. Nevertheless, gender stratification is also notable in the Han practices of Buddhism and Daoism. The association of women with immorality, defilement, seduction, falsehood, and desire in early Buddhist texts (Paul 1979, Wilson 1996) is blended with Confucianism in the Buddhism practiced by the (Han) Chinese (Lancaster 1984). Accordingly, identifying with and appropriating the presumed innate barriers against women’s enlightenment, some (Han) Buddhist nuns in contemporary Taiwan chose to renounce their own femininity and identify themselves with “heroic man” (*dazhangfu* 大丈夫, Crane 2007, in this volume). In contrast to its philosophical orientation towards gender-egalitarianism, the notion of male dominance also penetrates the doctrines and practices of the Daoist religion (Seaman 1981, Wilkerson, in this volume).

Congruent with its ideological gender hierarchy, the enduring tradition of the (Han) Chinese also gives males special privileges through the mutual reinforcement of a patrilineal kinship system and patrilocal residence pattern (Stacey 1983, Ocko 1991, Wolf 1972: 37), along with unequal marriage structures (Ebrey 1991:2, Watson 1991 b: 349-352). The objectification of (Han) women and their sexuality in marriage was clearly manifested not only in the long-enduring (Han) custom of affluent men taking concubines (Ebrey 1986, Huang 2006, Watson 1991a), but also in the rather rare practice of polyandry among economically impoverished men during the late Imperial Period (Sommer 2005: 29-54). Serving as an even more dramatic example of this same

institutionalized oppression of women, custom during the late Imperial Period (Gates 1989: 799) bestowed upon men the right to “the outright sale of their wives, daughters, and widowed sisters-in-law, and a large market for slaves, concubines, prostitutes, and adopted daughters flourished” (ibid.: 814). Furthermore, until 1949, (Han) women in China “suffered legal restrictions, especially in the area of property rights and family law which were based on the primacy of patrilineal descent and patriarchal authority” (Watson 1994: 26). Ethnographies of twentieth-century Hong Kong and rural Taiwan also reveal the low status of (Han) women throughout their entire life cycle (Wolf 1972) within the patrilineal social structure, in which their “namelessness” in the public arena constitutes a categorical denial of their full social adulthood (Watson 1986).

The patriarchal gender system of the (Han) Chinese has been intermingled with the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the revolutionary era (1921-1949, Gilmartin 1989, 1995). This tendency is also systematically manifested by the CCP’s prioritizing of class equality over gender equality (Stacey 1983) and the continuing oppressive role of patrilineal marriage and kinship systems, along with patrilocal residence patterns (Croll 1981, Johnson 1983, Ocko 1991, Stacey 1983). During the socialist era of China (1949-1976), (Han) gender inequality permeated the work unit—the building block of socialist urban organization—which served patriarchal functions by constraining opportunities for women (Lee 1998). Even the popularity of jokes about hen-pecked husbands was ironically associated with “the still-dominant mode of male superiority” (Honig and Hershatter 1988:311, Jankowiak 1993:236). Fostered by the market economy, some traditional Han practices of gender inequality have reemerged in new forms during the post-socialist era (1976-present). As an example, many migrant women have become “second wives” or “mistresses” to married men from Hong Kong who conduct business in southern China on a regular basis (Lang and Smart 2002).

Through history, the socio-structural and ideological fabrics of gender hierarchy in the (Han) cultural heritage have become interwoven with a wide range of oppressive social practices against women. The extreme customs were footbinding (Bossen 2002:37-52, Tao 1994, Drucker 1991, Gates 1997, 2001), female infanticide (Lee 2002, Lee, Feng, and Campbell 1994, Mungello 2008), and chastity cults (Tao 1991a, Mann 1987, T’ien 1988, Waltner 1981). Institutionalized violence against (Han) women, such as wife-beating, continues to prevail in contemporary China (Gilmartin 1990). Practices that placed (Han) women in extremely disadvantaged positions have also resurfaced or reinvented themselves in new socio-political conditions, dramatically manifested in the clash between the (Han) preference of sons over daughters and the one-child policy of the CCP (Greenhalgh 2008). While exercising control of women’s bodies in the context of rural (Han) China, the strict implementation of the birth control policy victimized (Han) women and reinforced their social subordination, especially during the 1980s (Anagnost 1988, Greenhalgh 1994). More tragically, the widespread practice of sex-selective abortion (Chu 2001, Greenhalgh and Li 1995), accompanied by occasional female infanticide (Croll

1994: 199-202, Mungello 2008, Ownby 2002:241-242), has led to the alarming sex-ratio imbalance in China (Gu and Roy 1996, Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005).

The hierarchical and oppressive nature of the mainstream Chinese gender system is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated by the unusual patterns of suicide among (Han) Chinese women. Scrutiny of the suicide patterns of (Han) Chinese women in the late 1800s and early 1900s reveals aspects of women's oppression at different stages of their life cycle: from unwanted, arranged marriages (Witke 1973), to the emotional isolation, aloneness, and stress of young wives (Wolf 1975:123-126, Johnson 1983: 2), to the social deprivation of hope for a young widow's future (Wolf 1975: 111), and to the total annihilation of security for those who in their fifties lost the affection and support of their sons (Wolf 1972, 1975). Recent studies demonstrate that the patriarchal heritage of the Han Chinese still shapes gendered suicide patterns in mainland China, especially as reflected in the uniquely (Chan *et al.* 2001:784, Rudmin *et al.* 2003:373) high ratio (2:1) of female to male suicides (Ji *et al.* 2001:2), and in the extremely high percentage of suicide deaths among young rural women (thirty-one percent of all suicides in mainland China) (Phillips *et al.* 1999:29, Chan *et al.* 2001:787-91).

In brief, gender hierarchy is deeply embedded in the heritage found in the Han gender system. The inferiority and subordination of women is proclaimed by dominant Han ideologies, which are structurally reinforced by the combination of strong patrilineal kinship systems and patrilocal post-residence patterns. In spite of radical social changes in modern China, gender inequality still haunts Han women.

In the next section, I will discuss recent studies that complement the depictions of the dark picture of (Han) women's oppression in patriarchal China. I will demonstrate that such inquiries underscore the ways dominant gender ideologies and institutions have been contested and transformed, although still primarily within narrowly Han-defined contexts.

Sinologist Challenges to the Norms of Han Patriarchy: Agency, Diversity, and Transformation

Since the most recent wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, bountiful research has challenged both the gender inequality underlying patriarchal (Han) Chinese society and the male bias embedded in sinology or Chinese Studies. Challenging the overwhelming emphasis on the (Han) patrilineal/patriarchal system and its oppression of women in previous studies, many scholars shift attention to the positive symbolism of the female gender and the power and

agency of (Han) Chinese women. This research demonstrates that notwithstanding its extraordinary intensity and coherence, the patriarchal conventions of the (Han) Chinese have by no means been monolithic and static.

In the realm of gender ideals, scholars have identified exceptions and complexity amidst the overwhelmingly negative representations of the female gender in (Han) religious traditions. For example, by exalting feminine or androgynous principles (Ames 1981), Daoist philosophy provides an egalitarian gender construction competing with hierarchy-based Confucianism. The female gender is also elevated in certain religious symbols, which are prominent among the (Han) Chinese and adopted by some ethnic minorities. For example, the most important Daoist goddess, the Queen Mother of the West (西王母 or 王母娘娘), tends to symbolize both transcendence and power (Cahill 1993). Similar representations are also identified with Kuan Yin (观音, “the Goddess of Mercy”) in Buddhism (Sangren 1983, Yü 2001) and Mazu (妈祖, literally “Mother Ancestor” or “the goddess of sea”) in folk religions (Sangren 1983).

Social representations of women in traditional (Han) society could also be seen as positive to a certain extent (White 2003), although rare and ambiguous compared to positive female symbols in the aforementioned religious domains. The story of Mencius’ mother, a widow who moved three times to ensure the best educational environment for her son, provides the most well-known moral example of the virtuous woman (Chan 2000). Genealogies and biographies found in South China reveal that during different dynasties, tributes paid to several mothers extolled both Confucian codified virtues and managerial abilities (Faure 2010). According to historical writings, while some Daoist holy women were revered (Cahill 2001: 18), other women were even venerated for pursuing “intellectual and philosophical interests” by a handful of Confucian scholars (Cheng 2001: 103). In early China, while women of significant political influence were often demonized as destructive and vicious beauties (Raphals 1998: 61-86), some were acclaimed as virtuous and prescient counselors (*ibid.*: 27-59). In modern rural Han contexts, while being enmeshed and entangled with negative symbolism, women’s power can be identified both in the danger they present to men through sexual intercourse and in their crossing of bodily and social boundaries (Ahern 1975: 209).

Beyond exploring positive representations and symbolism of women or the female gender, a wide range of studies further challenges the notion of monolithic (Han) patriarchy by highlighting women’s agency, or their active role in society. Re-examination of footbinding appears to be the most conspicuous among these efforts. Rather than taking the brutality of (Han) patriarchy as the only answer, Dorothy Ko (1997, 2001, 2005) and Ping Wang (2000) delved into those factors motivating women to bind the feet of their young daughters, even though it involved broken bones, rotten flesh, and crippled feet. While exploring the development and diversification of footbinding throughout its millennium-long history, these new studies reveal its

intricate intertwinement with (Han) Chinese culture, including myths, poetry, novels, folk songs, embroidery, and fashion. Importantly, instead of being mere passive victims of men and patriarchy, many women actively engaged and heavily invested in reproducing and elaborating this tradition. Embracing facets of this custom as their own gendered heritage, many (Han) women identified successful footbinding with beauty, dignity, and achievement. Likewise, rural (Han) women have not been mere victims of the birth-control policy of the Chinese government. Even when the one-child policy was strictly implemented in the 1980s, rural (Han) women often acted as agents on behalf of their own interests and those of their husbands' families in negotiating and shaping local implementations of the policy (Greenhalgh 1994, 2008). Nowadays, an increasing number of rural (Han) women in northern China have chosen to embrace a singleton daughter even when the policy of the state allows them to have a second child in order to try to obtain a son (Shi 2009a, 2009b, in this volume).

Researchers also explore the informal influences and resources available to women within the patriarchal constraints. Even in the Imperial periods, while Confucian classics confined women to the domestic realm (Mann and Cheng 2001: 2), female influence often expanded from "inner quarters" to the "outer" realms in practice (Ebrey 1993, Ko 1994). Studies of rural (Han) women in the twentieth century provide rich ethnographic insights on their informal power and their roles in patrilineal families. In coining the phrase "uterine family," Margery Wolf (1972: 33, 36-37) introduced an analytical tool to identify the informal kin network a woman established through emotional bonding with her offspring, especially with her sons. The concept of the "uterine family" demonstrates the active role (Han) Chinese women play in constructing their identities and securing their statuses and old-age support within their husbands' patrilineages, which structurally delineates them as outsiders. More recent research has also revealed the continual ties married women are able to maintain with their natal families (Judd 1989).

Beyond establishing informal influences within the boundaries of the patriarchal family structure, some Han women developed radical mechanisms of resistance against marriage norms. Studies on this subject tend to blend emphasis on women's agency with special attention to regional diversity. According to Janice Stockard (1989), many (Han) women in the Canton Delta began to gain certain levels of economic independence through their employment in the silk-reeling industry in the late nineteenth century. Several forms of alternatives became available for these women to either break the shackles or reduce the oppressive effect of the (Han) marriage system. The most radical form was "sworn spinsterhood," which was a status ritually achieved by a woman who decided to completely reject marriage by vowing to live as a self-supporting spinster (ibid: 70). Another form of resistance was "bride-initiated

spirit marriage" (ibid: 92-93), in which a woman strategically reconciled social expectations with her desire for independence by ritually marrying a man who had died before the marriage was arranged. In many cases, such a marriage fulfilled the parents' hope for their daughters to have "an altar for their tablet after death" (ibid: 94). The third alternative, "delayed transfer marriage," was a custom in which a bride returned to live with her natal family for several years shortly after her wedding (Siu 1990, Stockard 1989). Despite the controversy over whether or not it actually constituted resistance (Gates 2001:146), delayed transfer marriage and other marriage variations were at the very least widely appropriated by many women for their own advantage in many areas of southern China (Silber 1994:48, Siu 1990, Watson 1994:35).

Surpassing individual appropriations of oppressive customs, some women even developed their own supporting networks or organizations in order to alleviate or escape the patriarchal bondage of (Han) traditions in the early twentieth century. Detouring patrilineal kinship ties and hierarchies, women's non-kin networks flourished in girls' houses (Sankar 1985, Stockard 1989, Watson 1994:30), spinster-sisterhoods (Sankar 1984, Topley 1975), sworn sisterhood (Silber 1994), and unmarried women's festival associations (Chiang 1994: 257). These formalized relationships between women provided them with emotional support, along with various levels of social cooperation. In particular, while playing a significant role in promoting radical alternatives to Han marriage norms in the Canton Delta (Sankar 1984, 1985, Stockard 1989, Watson 1994:30), girls houses were also transformed by immigrant women in Singapore to establish "sisterhood networks in coolie houses" in the 1930s (Chiang 1994:257). As an extreme case, the institution of sworn sisterhood laid the social foundation for the usage of women's script (*nūshu* 女书), a unique writing system developed and mastered exclusively by women, in the Jiangyong County of rural Hunan (Liu 2004, Silber 1994:47-49). Perhaps the most institutionalized female organizations for those women renouncing (Han) family traditions were religious communities, such as Buddhist and Daoist vegetarian halls (Sankar 1984:52, Ruf 1998) and Buddhist monasteries (Crane 2007).

While exploring women's agency, researchers have called special attention to regional diversity in the status and conditions of (Han) Chinese women, particularly in South China (e.g., Ko 1994, Siu and Chan 2010, Stockard 1989). For example, silk-producing in the Pearl River Delta brought about economic changes, which fostered the aforementioned leeway and escape which enabled women to cope with or escape the bondages of patriarchal marriage norms (Stockard 1989). The positive impact of regional economic development on the status of women can also be identified in earlier Chinese history. For example, while women were traditionally excluded from formal education in (Han) Chinese tradition, some women became active participants in the literary and elite culture of 17th century Jiangnan (江南), where the regional economy flourished dramatically (Ko 1994).