

JINHUA JIA:

Gender, Power, and Talent: The Journey of Daoist Priestesses in Tang China.

xxvi, 324 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. \$70. ISBN 978 0 23118 444 1.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000557

The distinctive role of women in the life of lay and monastic communities is acknowledged in many religions. More rarely, women occupy a regular place among the clergy. Daoism is such an exception. In its earliest communal organization, female initiates performed liturgical functions on a par with male priests. The medieval Supreme Clarity movement paid homage to women as visionary spiritual guides, and the modern Complete Truth order raised women to positions of communitarian leadership. Exploring the religious careers and aspirations of women under the Tang (618–907), Jinhua Jia more than confirms this general pattern: she makes a case for the particular prominence of Daoist women in the religious and literary culture of that period.

Historical factors favoured the ascent of women in Tang society (chapter 1). The Central Asian background of the ruling house eased legal and ritual limitations imposed on women by Confucian society. Access to education produced female authors and women's societies. Female officials served as redactors at court. Changing perceptions permitted the unprecedented rise of powerful court ladies, epitomized by Empress Wu, the only female sovereign in Chinese history. Many imperial princesses and palace ladies (famously several sisters and daughters of Emperor Xuanzong) were ordained as Daoist priestesses.

Women took religious vows at various stages in their lives and regardless of their marital status. Jia pays close attention to the motivations and circumstances that triggered the decision to seek ordination (chapter 2). Escaping unwanted marriages, seeking a safe haven from internecine palace politics, or generating merit on behalf of deceased ancestors were typical motives. For those in poor health, a life devoted to religion promised deliverance. Others entered religious orders after the death of a husband. To those dismissed from palace service, the convent offered a retirement option. Notwithstanding the wide popularity of Buddhist monastic vocations, palace women tended to elect Daoist ordinations in deference to the reigning family's veneration of Laozi as the dynastic ancestor.

Some Daoist priestesses chose to remain unmarried to dedicate themselves to study, self-improvement, or the arts, winning the esteem of leading officials and literati. Others enjoyed the social and economic independence of a lightly cloistered convent life. Daoists did not practise the tonsure. Women were permitted to maintain secular wardrobes and material possessions. Open to visitors, convents were appreciated for their attractive grounds, artistic life, and rooms for rent. In this context, the urbane culture of literary salons and female entertainers celebrated in Tang lyric verse and narrative literature fused with the Daoist theme of spiritual initiation through encounters with goddesses and female immortals. With a tinge of scandal, some Daoist priestesses became assimilated with the demi-monde of courtesans and the adventures of young nobles and examination candidates sojourning in the capital.

Chapter 3 turns from this equivocally worldly setting to the practices and ritual functions of mainstream Daoist priestesses. They held the same liturgical qualifications as monastic and non-monastic male clergy. Some priestesses served as

commissioners for ritual, presided over palace chapels, or acted as spiritual mentors to the imperial family. Others made their mark as estate managers, builders, preachers, and experts in alchemy, medicine, or spiritual exercises.

Jia complements this panoramic tableau with a series of case studies: Liu Moran (773–840), an expert in Inner Alchemy, as well as a model daughter, wife, and mother (chapter 4); Hu Yin (fl. 848), a physician and specialist in longevity and gymnastics techniques (chapter 5); and three eighth-century Daoist poets anthologized in the first collection of women's verse, *New Songs from the Jade Pool* (ninth century): Li Jilan, an ordained priestess and romantic poet ranked above the famed courtesan Xue Tao (c. 770–832); Yuan Chun, the well-educated daughter of a gentry family and abbess of a convent; and Cui Zhongrong, a priestess with a high-level ordination whose poetic persona blurred the roles of celebrant and entertainer (chapter 6). Jia next offers a revisionist take on the notorious Yu Xuanji (c. 843–68), the abandoned consort whose eventful convent life ended in execution on a murder charge at the age of 25. Yu's surviving oeuvre comprises more than 50 poems, including several acclaimed masterpieces. One expresses the author's dissatisfaction with social and gender conventions barring her from a career as a poet (chapter 7). Du Guangting's early tenth-century *Assembled Immortals of the Walled Fortress* is examined in the appendix as representative of the mythology that lent Daoist convents their supernatural aura. "Walled Fortress", like "Jade Pool", referred to the residence of the Queen Mother of the West, patron of Daoist goddesses and female immortals.

The Daoist conception of the clergy's place in society differed from that of the Buddhist *sangha*. Lay ordinations, including childhood initiations for girls and boys, optionally led to clerical vocations. At a transitory stage, young men and women could be married and live with their families, sometimes alternating between home and monastic residence. The gender-specific focus of this book does not encompass this broader social dimension of Daoism. However, Jinhua Jia convincingly argues that Daoist priestesses formed a distinct (albeit diverse) socio-religious class under the Tang. A special mystique attached to them as a group and exposed them to controversy. Daoist priestesses were romanticized in poetry and fiction or decried as *femmes fatales* and sorceresses. Under the Song, Neo-Confucian literati disparaged their status as poets and tut-tutted their disregard for womanly conduct.

Gender, Power, and Talent lifts the veil of these prejudices to reveal the singularity and complexity of female Daoist vocations in Tang China. Making wide use of neglected epigraphic and literary sources, especially tomb epitaphs and Dunhuang manuscripts, Jia's solid, original scholarship yields in-depth perspectives on the priestesses' family backgrounds, accomplishments, and clerical roles, as well as new insights into their motives and aspirations. This book will stand as a significant contribution to the social, cultural, and religious history of the Tang.

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