

RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF OPPRESSION AND CREATIVITY FOR CHINESE WOMEN

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An accurate sense of women's experience can come only from detecting *both* the ideologies and institutions that oppress and the struggle of women to create active and fulfilling lives for themselves. . . If we look only for oppression we will miss the creativity with which women — never the primary shapers of their cultures — have foraged in their cultural environments for the tools with which to make their lives.

—Margaret Miles 1985:3

Recent feminist scholarship has begun to focus on the role of religion in the construction of gender and the shaping of women's lives. In the past, many feminists have dismissed religion as a patriarchal structure that served only to oppress women. The authors of *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*¹ challenged this view by demonstrating that while religious images of the feminine could at times function oppressively, "reinforcing religious and other social structures which excluded and silenced women, they were at other times and places critically reappropriated by women who used them as a means of self-expression and liberation" (Shaw 1988:1). Margaret Miles, in her introduction to *Immaculate and Powerful*, argues that by examining the "interface of religious symbols and social situations" (Miles 1985:1) one can come to understand more clearly both the oppression and creativity of women. By re-evaluating religious symbols and beliefs that are repressive and incorporating those positive images that offer possibilities for personal development and social change, women can use religion to escape the limitations of their socially prescribed roles. Thus, Miles says that religion can "make available tools with which women may create a degree of spiritual, political and personal autonomy not provided

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by secular culture” (Miles 1985:2).

For Chinese women, religion has indeed been a source of oppression, yet women have found ways to use religious beliefs to obtain independence that was denied to them in secular society.² While certain religious concepts functioned to exclude women from participation in ritual, other religious ideas enabled women to empower themselves through ritual means. By establishing a relationship between themselves and the deity, women could find sanction for behavior that differed from the social norm. An exploration of various means of creativity, or ways that women used religious beliefs to their own advantage, that women in different regions of China had available to them can shed light on the diversity of religious experiences that Chinese women could have.

As an oppressive force, religion promoted ideas about women as sources of ritual pollution and dangerous power. According to Taiwanese folk belief, the biological processes of menstruation and childbirth cause women to become unclean and therefore taboo from religious ritual. Buddhist ideology connects women to the physical world and regards them as the source of all that is impure and prevents one from passing on to a higher plane of being. Thus in the ideologies of both folk religion and Buddhism, women find barriers to religious fulfillment because of their bodies.³

2. By “oppression” I mean here that certain religious beliefs and taboos restricted women from worship and ritual, or posited that because of her physical impurity woman was inferior to man. Religion could thus be a restricting force on women’s behavior.

3. Diana Paul writes in *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, “from a feminist perspective, one perceives a destructive, complex set of images preventing women from fulfillment within the Buddhist religion” (Paul 1985:xx).

The “five obstacles” of woman’s physical being which derive from the senses, hinder her from directly attaining Buddhahood (Seaman 1981:385).

A section of the Blood Bowl Sutra reads:

Birth is an unclean thing: a woman’s body is an unclean collection of worms, pus and filth, which comes together and collects.

Ten months it ripens between the two viscera, entrapped, pressed into a female prison.

One thing should be known, this body is not the Pure Land. No lotus is to be seen, nor wafting sandalwood incense.

There is only the stench of shit, where the fetus develops for so long.

And this life can only enter and leave through a woman’s vagina (Seaman 1981:389).

RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF OPPRESSION: POLLUTION TABOOS EXCLUDING WOMEN FROM RITUAL

The pollution of women's bodies severs communication between the gods and men. Menstruating women or women within one month after childbirth are prohibited from religious worship lest the gods be offended by the sight of this dirty blood. A menstruating woman is also banned from entering a temple for fear of preventing other worshippers from making contact with the gods. If a spirit medium is attempting to go into a trance, a polluted woman hinders the god from entering his body to communicate with the devotees. A menstruating woman also obstructs the gods from entering the bodies of men who are performing the ritual firewalk to cleanse the god's image, causing their feet to be burned. If a shaman mutilates himself during a possession ritual in the presence of menstruating woman, he may not be able to stop the blood flow. Prohibitions on worship extend to anyone who has had contact with a menstruating woman or who has entered a room in which a woman has given birth in the preceding month (See Ahern 1975).

Menstrual blood (and postpartum discharge, which is believed to be the same substance) is polluting because of its double-sided power. It is a substance that holds the potential for great benefit or great harm. Menstrual blood is associated with profound power because it is believed to create babies. According to Taiwanese folk belief, menstrual blood is transformed into the body and bone of the fetus. This blood also has dangerous power in that it may harm the child. The Placenta God, Thai Sin (胎神), lives in the blood that surrounds the fetus and is the child's spirit. After birth the placenta must be ritually disposed of to assure that no harm comes to the infant (See Ahern 1975). Pollution from the mother is also passed on to the infant and may threaten its life by producing measles or other diseases (See Furth 1987). Therefore a ritual cleansing of the infant is performed to purify it of the pollution it got from the womb and from having passed through the "dirty part of a woman" (M. Wolf 1972:571).

Beliefs about women's pollution may also be connected to the power and danger in women's social roles as described by Emily Martin Ahern in her article "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women." In the Chinese patriarchal family, the bride is considered an outsider until she has given birth to a male heir, thus assuring her place in the descent line of the husband's family. A woman's most valued role within the

family is her ability to produce sons to carry on the patriline.

This ability is also the source of a woman's power to subvert the solidarity of the male family. By bearing sons and creating a uterine family of her own, a woman can gain control within the partriarchal family structure. Mothers seek to tie their children to them through close emotional bonds in order to be able to have their wishes represented in the family by their sons when they reach adulthood. A great threat is also posed by the young woman who may lure her husband away from his family duties through her sexual charm. Young wives are generally feared for their sexuality and their supposed ability to cause strife among the brothers which would result in a division of the ideal male family and in the couple's perhaps leaving the home and neglecting their sacred duty of caring for the husband's parents. Thus "like the menstrual blood that produces children, a woman's reproductive power is double-edged" (Ahern 1975:175). It is both beneficial to the family and potentially destructive. Gary Seaman believes that pollution beliefs function to lessen the threat that women may bring to family harmony:

In societies like China, where descent is based almost exclusively on the male line, women's rights and the way women are incorporated into their husband's families are fraught with danger, threatening male solidarity. To preserve the solidarity of the male-oriented agnatic line, a rationalizing ideology develops that subordinates the role of women to that of men (Seaman 1981b:382).

This is done by the transmission of pollution beliefs that make explicit the perception of women as sources of danger in the male realm. However, the question remains, do these taboos stemming from the physical pollution associated with women entirely prevent women from gaining access to religious power?

The various restrictions placed on women's religious worship in Taiwan because of pollution taboos led Emily Martin Ahern to write, "given the gods' extreme sensitivity to pollution, we are prompted to ask whether women are allowed less contact with the gods than men because they are more likely to generate pollution" (Ahern 1975:181).⁴ She sees a hierarchy in the spiritual world where the high, pure gods are worshipped at important festivals by men, and the low, dirty spirits and ghosts are worshipped by women. "Men worship when political and economic benefits are likely to ensue" (Ahern 1975:181). Ahern suggests biological reasons for this division, saying that the fact that women worship the low, unclean gods is "natural" because women are often unclean

themselves, while it is equally "appropriate" that men monopolize worship of the high clean gods because they are usually clean. Steven Sangren, however, emphasizes social roles rather than biological differences in explaining the domination of men in ancestral and territorial rituals:⁵

Men, after all, are the formal representatives of their lines and households and must therefore act as such in the associated cults. But women are not thereby excluded from playing a major role in ritual association with higher gods, for there are few if any gods higher or more powerful than Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother [Wang Mu Niang—niang], and women do play important roles in their worship. This is not to say that women do not suffer ritual discrimination as a consequence of Chinese pollution beliefs, for they do. Moreover, even in female-deity cults, men tend to take over many leading roles in public rituals. But it seems to me that the distinction between men's and women's participation in deity worship is less that men co-opt ritual associated with "high gods," leaving only "low gods" to women, than that men assume leadership of the more prestigious, public rituals and leave domestic and individual worship to women (Sangren 1983:21).

While this seems very convincing, it does not negate Ahern's argument, since the three major female deities which Sangren mentions fall outside the official hierarchy of the territorial cults that are prominent in the local communities which Ahern describes. Territorially defined ritual communities are often based on male lineage groups

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4. A Buddhist nun I interviewed told me that there was no prohibition on menstruating women worshipping Kuan Yin. Two women I interviewed at Taipei's (Taoist) Hsing Tien Kung Temple (行天宮) told me that although it is still believed that women should not worship when they are menstruating, because their own personal worship will be inefficacious (*pu ling* 不靈), other worshippers will not be affected. Perhaps in the rural areas there has been less change since 1972 when Emily Martin Ahern did her field work.
 5. Ancestors are worshipped on the family altar and in ancestral halls, the more recently deceased being worshipped at home. David Jordan writes, "the worship of these beings is tied in with notions of memorializing the dead and providing for their continued comfort after death . . . the ancestral cult inevitably becomes involved in a variety of ways with relations between and among families, compounds and lineages" (Jordan 1981:97). Arthur P. Wolf argues that in territorially defined ritual communities, lesser gods control small local systems and higher gods control larger areas. "In imperial times this hierarchy of territorial cults was linked ideologically to the officially sanctioned state cult, which extended the celestial hierarchy upward from country-, prefecture-, and province-level city god (Ch'eng Huang) cults and culminated in the rites performed by the emperor on behalf of all of China" (Sangren 1983:5).

and thus may act as an expression of lineage solidarity. Women play a major role in Buddhist worship where individual salvation is emphasized over the communal rituals of the territorial cults which men dominate. Perhaps in the prestigious, public cults women are relegated to worshipping "low" gods while in the individual (Kuan Yin 觀音) and sectarian cults (Wang Mu Niang-niang 王母娘娘) women can take major roles. In his article "The Sexual Politics of Karmic Retribution," Gary Seaman argues that the hierarchy of purity among the deities and the worshippers is political:

... as a result of the carefully defined hierarchy of purity and virtue among the heavenly beings, the right to perform various roles in rituals is an important expression of political rights and power . . . Since pollution usually disqualifies women from participating in rites directed to the higher deities, women cannot achieve for themselves the benefits that a regular relationship with the gods can bring. As a result, they must depend on men to act as their representatives or intermediaries in most important religious matters (Seaman 1981:384).

Even in Buddhist thought, which is generally considered more egalitarian, women cannot become Buddhas because of their physical pollution.⁶ A segment of the "Blood Bowl Sutra" (慈悲血盆禪) reads: "Birth is an unclean thing: a woman's body is an unclean collection of worms, pus and filth, which comes together and collects" (Seaman 1981:389). While Taiwanese folk beliefs regard women's bodies as only ritually unclean and not "really dirty," Buddhist scriptures hold that women's bodies are literally

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6. Diana Paul writes, "many sympathetic to the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism believe it to be an egalitarian religion, more supportive of women than the earlier form of Buddhism or other religions. Indeed, there are positive images of the feminine in the Mahayana tradition, and laywomen and nuns play an active role in Buddhist religious practices. However, texts preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, the educated religious elite, whose views do not often reflect sexual egalitarianism" (Paul 1985:xix). Paul continues to argue against the view that Buddhism was egalitarian, "The argument may be put forth that Hindu and Confucian values, as well as indigenous folk beliefs, are the origins of Buddhist nonegalitarianism. However, if Buddhists accepted nonegalitarian beliefs from outside their original teachings and incorporated them as sutras, that is, as part of their scriptural canon, they had to have accepted such beliefs as worthy of the status of scripture. To that extent, they could not have considered such nonegalitarian views as the antithesis of the Buddha's doctrine; therefore, they cannot be said to have consistently or wholeheartedly advocated equality of the sexes" (Paul 1985:xxiii).

infested with filth.⁷

In a Buddhist ritual called "Breaking the Blood Bowl" (破血盆) which is performed at the death of a woman, the story of Mu-lien (目蓮) is acted out.⁸ Mu-lien rescued his mother from hell because his filial piety moved the Buddha. In the ceremony of the Blood Bowl, the woman's son drinks a bowl of his mother's menstrual blood (dyed wine) symbolizing the remains of his own birth and the source of her pollution. By demonstrating his filial piety, and atoning for the pain that he caused his mother in childbirth, the son, like Mu-lien, releases his mother from the bonds of karmic retribution.

Because of their polluting nature, women cannot approach the deities who could help them to overcome the ties of karmic retribution caused by their sexuality. Women need men to act on their behalf, and the story of Mu-lien is thus perfectly a propos of women's condition in China and Taiwan (Seaman 1981b:394).

Seaman sees men's monopoly of religious rights clearly revealed in the practice of shamanism. Spirit mediums of the most pure and high gods and of the most politically important cults are almost always male. Cultivation of spirit mediums involves a process of ritual purification in which the prospective medium is confined to a hut and is restricted from contact with polluting substances such as menstrual or birth blood, sex, and meat. For some cults this process requires forty-nine days of purity, impossible for pre-menopausal women. Seaman thus views pollution beliefs as political and argues that men deliberately perpetuate negative beliefs about women's sexuality in order to rationalize their inferior position and deny them the right to participate in ritual.

7. Ahern noted that there was a distinction in Taiwanese between "unclean" or "not clean" (*bou chieng-khi* 無清潔) and "really unclean" or "dirty" (*la-sam* 污穢), (Ahern 1975:170). Informants expressed the idea that "bodily substances like urine, feces, and pus (which do not affect worship of the gods) are 'really' dirty, whereas menstrual blood and corpses are dirty in a different sense" (Ahern 1975:172). In Taiwan, "really unclean" substances can also be "poisonous", while ritually polluting substances are "unclean" but never "poisonous". In Hong Kong, "poisonous" refers to both "really unclean" and "unclean" substances (Topley 1974:234).
8. Gary Seaman points out that "in some Chinese dialects the word for "blood bowl" (*hueq-phun* 血盆) also means "placenta" (Seaman 1981b: 388-389). "The by-products of birth and menstruation are typically the ingredients of the most potent "charms" (*hu-a*) (符) in the magical arts. Paradoxically, the same polluting items call forth from men the ultimate proof of their filial piety: during a mother's funeral rites, a son must drink the blood of his birth" (Seaman 1981b:388).

POLLUTION REVERSED ON MEN: A FEMALE POLITICAL WEAPON

If ritual beliefs about pollution are used to exclude women from participating in important religious activities, how do women use religion to gain power and independence in patriarchal society? Given the strength of pollution taboos in Chinese society, there may be two ways that women can subvert male dominance or gain power of their own. On one hand, women might directly turn pollution around on men, and use the destructive power of menstrual blood to harm them. Alternatively, women could deny their bodies and their biological roles as childbearers through celibacy, thus escaping the pollution associated with marriage. In the latter case, religion is an important tool for women to create the practices and institutions necessary for autonomy.

Can women ever deliberately exploit the power of menstrual blood to their own advantage instead of passively accepting it as a source of exclusion? Can the breaking of taboo ever become a source of power for women through magic or ritual? Ahern asks, "do women wield their supposed capacity to pollute as a weapon, intentionally directing it at others to gain their own ends?" (Ahern 1975:178). She doubts this potential, concluding that:

... aside from the possibility of interfering with worship, women seem to have no special ability to unleash the destructive power of their menstrual discharge. Menstrual blood is a powerful component of sorcerers' potions, but the knowledge to use it belongs to ritual experts, available for hire by men and women alike (Ahern 1975:189).

Yet this ability to interfere with worship is not a negligible power, for, as Seaman demonstrates, religious ritual is of vital importance to the community and the ability to perform worship has political implications. If pollution taboos are used to restrict women from the benefits that come from a relation with the gods, cannot a polluted woman then also deliberately prevent men from communicating with gods and deriving the benefits so essential to their welfare in the community?

Seaman describes a case which a man became possessed by a Black Dog Demon (*o-kau-cia*: 黑狗精) which destroyed the solidarity of his ritual cult.⁹ In Taiwan, the "black dog" (*o-kau* 黑狗) is a symbol for unclean sexuality and "black dog's blood" (*o-kau-hueq* 黑狗血) is a euphemism for menstrual blood. A votive plaque of the goddess Ma Tsu (媽祖), which was obtained by the man at a festival through an illicit rela-

tion with a female shaman of Ma Tsu, was brought into the cult. This plaque was believed to be the source of the evil spirit which possessed the man and destroyed the cult. Seaman writes:

... my informants even suggested that the plaque could have been purposely contaminated with *o-kau-hueq* (menstrual blood) ... as a result, the cult was unable to play an effective spiritual role in the community, and it declined in social and political force. ... The Black Dog Demon thus can be seen as the apotheosis of the destructive potential of female sexuality: when this sexuality destroyed the bond between the men in the cult, it also destroyed the political unity of the community at large (Seaman 1981b:394).

Thus we see that woman's potential for destroying unity and harmony in the patriarchal family extends to male ritual groups as well.

POWER OF WOMAN'S BLOOD: HEALING AND DESTROYING

The double-sided power of menstrual blood can also be seen in its use in black magic and medicine, and is paralleled by women's roles as both healers and witches. Both menstrual blood and the placenta are valued ingredients of magic potions and aphrodisiacs. These ingredients were believed to be especially effective in restoring men's sexual vitality and aiding in the regrowth of the penises of eunuchs. Blood can either be used as a magic charm or as a healing element, the first menstruation of girls being the most desirable and sold under the name of *kao t'ang ts'ao* (高堂草) in apothecaries. While menstrual blood is taken to be the most efficacious cure for a variety of illnesses, including cholera and typhus, it is believed that men who have been treated too often with menstrual blood may gradually lose their mental capacities, demonstrating the negative power that women's sexuality is thought to have over men.¹⁰

Blood used in magic or sorcery can have beneficial or dangerous properties. A

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9. Gary Seaman notes that in Taiwanese "black dog" is a word for a ladies' man. Black dogs are also clearly associated with women's destructiveness to male solidarity in the agnatic family. "In the versions [of the story of Mu-lien] acted out at Taiwanese funerals, Mu-lien's mother is accused of earning her damnation by feeding the fetus of a black dog (*o-kau-the*) to her husband's brother, causing his death. In these funeral dramas, the reference to the fetus of a black dog is often understood to mean a human fetus—a much used ingredient in black magic potions" (Seaman 1981:392).
 10. See Frick, 1951, on ritual uses of menstrual blood.

shaman can ward off possession by a spirit by taking the blood of a woman along with that of a white dog. If used too often, however, this remedy will result in a permanent loss of the power to go into trance. Menstrual blood is also used in exorcisms and in charms, for the evil spirits fear blood.¹¹

While blood can be used as a protective charm it is also used in sorcery and black magic. Taoist priests perform esoteric rituals using menstrual blood or the blood of a black dog, symbolic of menstrual blood, to call down curses upon people. According to superstition, menstrual blood can extinguish a man's "gold lamps", which represent his health and luck. Again the double-sided power of blood is demonstrated in its power to protect those who use it and destroy those against whom it is used. Gary Seaman calls " 'Black dog's blood' (*o-kau-hueq*), which refers to human menstrual blood—the most powerful ingredient in black magic charms that give power over other people" (Seaman 1981b:392). Thus it is possible that women could turn pollution beliefs around and gain magical power through the breaking of taboo. Women could also gain power in a more positive way through religious roles such as that of shaman.

SHAMAN: WOMAN AS RELIGIOUS LEADER

Paradoxically, while women's pollution is believed to destroy contact between man and gods, women shamans act as communicators with the gods. The woman shaman is a vital healing figure in village society. The shaman does not drive away evil spirits but mediates with them to cure the patient. The Chinese shaman restores relations between the living and their dead relatives in order to assure harmony and health.

Women generally become mediums through spontaneous possession rather than through purity cultivation, the method most commonly used by male shamans (Seaman 1981b:385).¹² Often women shamans are mediums for the lesser cults or for

11. See Frick 1951 for uses of blood.

12. One female shaman for Wang Mu Niang-niang that I interviewed in Taiwan told me that she became possessed after a dream in which the goddess appeared to her and told her that she would begin to speak through her. She becomes possessed by closing her eyes and going into a trance. Her performance was much less ritualized than the performance of a male shaman for Chi-kong that I witnessed, who became possessed only after a long ritual involving incense and wine and shaking and occasionally collapsing.

Worshippers referred to this female shaman as "A-yi" (阿姨) or "Auntie" not as "*tang-ki*" (童乩) or "shaman" as they did the male shaman.

ghosts of the dead rather than for gods. Elliot notes that in Singapore the shamans who raise the souls of the dead are almost exclusively women practitioners (Elliot 1955: 71, 135–138). De Groot writes of similar female mediums in Amoy (De Groot 1969:VI, 1323–1333) and Jack Potter describes this type of female shaman, the *mann seaq phox* (問醒婆), “old ladies who speaks to spirits” in Canton (Potter 1974:207). These shamans communicate with the souls of the dead, recapture the kidnapped souls of sick children, predict the future, care for the souls of girls who died before marriage and protect the health of village children as their fictive mothers (*khay mha* 契媽). As ritual intermediaries between the villagers and the world of the supernatural, shamans gain power and authority in the community. Seaman found that shamans do not have to conform to their normal social roles when possessed:

A shaman, when he is possessed by a god, can give direct and peremptory commands in a fashion completely beyond his ability to exercise authority while in a normal unpossessed state. At the same time, however, the shaman is protected from negative sentiments by the idiom of kinship in which his relationship with the gods is expressed (Seaman 1981a:73).

People with illnesses or bad luck consult the shaman who then holds a seance to contact their dead relatives. Often these envious ghosts are the cause of the trouble and, speaking through the shaman, tell the living what must be done to remove the bad luck.

Unhappy ghosts, either those who died before the end of their normal lifespan or those who were not treated with the proper respect after death, are believed to cause disaster for their family, bringing illness or bad luck. Women who are not able to have children will also consult a spirit medium to seek the cause of their barrenness. When the shaman becomes possessed she is usually aided by a supernatural figure. For example, in Singapore the soul raisers call on the Goddess Kuan Yin to lead them into the kingdom of hell. (See Elliot 1955).

Deceased children can also function as tutelary spirits. Potter found that in Canton, “deceased children, who mediate between their mother and the supernatural world, are essential to a career as a spirit medium” (Potter 1974:226). The pattern for women shamans was that they would become possessed after a traumatic event, such as the death of their children or husband. The ghosts of the woman’s dead children visit her in dreams or possess her and urge her to become a spirit medium. Usually the

woman and especially her husband resist. The insistent children will continue to possess the woman, driving her mad, making her seriously ill and even causing her to appear to die, until the woman agrees to become a shaman. Potter tells the story of one woman:

Her husband continued his opposition to the spirits' demands until one day her daughter's spirit entered Kao Paak-neung's body and took her soul up to the heavens, making her appear to die several times during one long evening. Finally, at two in the morning, the husband relented and said she could become a shaman. Kao Paak-neung went wild with joy, jumping on tables and chairs, eating silver paper, incense, and candles, and singing loudly (Potter 1974:227).

In Chinese society, where a woman's most respected identity is that of childbearer and wife, and where a woman's only security in the male family comes from producing male heirs and having children to look after her in her old age, it is not surprising that a woman whose children (or both children and husband) have died would appear to be possessed or driven mad with grief and desperation. Becoming a spirit medium is a means for the displaced woman to gain a position in society as well as a means to maintain a spiritual relation with her dead children and to earn a living for herself. Elliot found in Singapore that most spirit mediums were middle-aged widows. Potter says:

The personal tragedies each medium suffered were psychic shocks of the first magnitude. Their profession gives these women a useful and important social role that replaces their aborted family relationships. Perhaps the spirit mediums find sustenance in their contact with the spirits of the children who would have been of such emotional and social importance to them had they lived to adulthood (Potter 1974:228).

The shamans also perform a useful social function by taking care of the spirits of those who are not incorporated into the ancestral worship system. Women who die before marriage are not members of their father's lineage nor do they belong to the lineage of a husband. People are therefore afraid to put the spirit tablets of these women on their altar for fear that they will haunt them. The shaman takes care of these problematic spirits by placing them on an altar in her home and worshipping them twice a day. In many cases it appears that an important function of the female in Chinese religious practice is to care for the problematic dead. It is the Goddess Kuan Yin who is the protectress of those of the dead who have no descendants to perform the rites of ancestor worship for them; hence the memorial tablets and ashes of unmarried daughters and other structurally anomalous dead are usually placed in Buddhist

temples. In Canton, women shamans replace broken or missing family ties by acting as *khay ma*, or fictive mothers, to unmarried women (Potter 1974:207, 222). In other cases it is the women's vegetarian halls or the marriage resistance houses that perform the functions of the extended family in its absence (Topley 1954:51).

Potter's description of the woman shaman's place in the religious structure of the Cantonese village community, supports Ahern's view that women are relegated to the worship of the "low" end of the hierarchy. Ghosts are the dirtiest spirits in the ranking of gods, ancestors and ghosts, and it is again women who are the controllers of the low, dark, spirits.

The supernatural world of Cantonese villagers is divided into two parts, which reflect the two aspects of their social world. One part belongs to the benevolent ancestral spirits who represent and celebrate the valued goals of lineage existence The second part is the realm of the malevolent ghosts who bring the villagers sorrow and misfortune. These ghosts represent the unsuccessful, the unfulfilled, the jealous, the angry. The Cantonese shaman contributes to village society by controlling the dark side of the supernatural world (Potter 1974:228).

In contrast to the shamans described by Potter, Elliott and De Groot, in Taiwan there are female shamans who are mediums for gods rather than for ghosts. Meir Shahaar interviewed a shaman who was a medium for Wang Mu Niang—niang, the Eternal Mother, and later became a medium for the God Chi-kong (濟公). Unlike the shamans described by Potter, she is married and has two living children. She became possessed involuntarily by the spirit after her husband's business began to fail. During this period of family difficulties she became sick, was plagued by hallucinations and fainting spells. All these symptoms were signs that the deity wanted to possess her. Now she is a successful medium with a cult grown up around her and she also acts as a ritual healer, preparing charms and Chinese herbal medicines. Her husband has now become subordinate to her, acting as her assistant. Since the shaman is believed to become the god while possessed, this may create a strange power relation between the man and wife. Thus the roles that women create for themselves through religious means vary from region to region.¹³

13. Meir Shahaar, personal communication, April 1988.

RELIGIOUS PIETY: A TOOL TO BUILD ALTERNATIVE LIFE STYLES

While shamanism allowed women to gain some authority within their villages and households, other religious institutions provided a means for women to set up alternative communities. Chinese women's vegetarian houses (*chai t'ang* 齋堂) were established in areas such as Singapore to meet the needs of Chinese immigrant women and local unmarried and widowed Buddhist women. The vegetarian houses also fulfilled important emotional needs. (Topley 1954:51). Blake found some marriage laments among the Hakka of Hong Kong that contrast the sisterhood of the vegetarian houses to the dreadful separation of marriage.

Though vegetarians are divided into rooms,
 Their numbers have limits;
 But as I am from my sisters divided,
 I have no limits . . .
 But as I am from my sisters divided,
 I have no home.

(Blake 1978:19)

Many of the immigrant women who were able to earn a living for themselves as workers or servants were eager to avoid marriage. Nunneries also provided means for women to escape marriage, but the majority of the women who joined vegetarian houses did so because of the restrictions on nuns.¹⁴ While the vegetarian houses are also religious institutions, the members, (*Chai ku* 齋姑) are not expected to live the life of an ascetic or to cut themselves off from secular life as are nuns (*ni ku* 尼姑). For example, they can eat meat when not in the house and smoke cigarettes. While all

14. Nuns are considered by some Chinese not to be "real" women but an androgynous caste," classed, along with monks . . . as a separate gender — a special category of neutered outcasts who live on the margins of society" (J. L. Watson 1988:127). They are therefore beyond the scope of this paper which will only treat in detail those women who stay within the secular social fabric even while they use religion to create alternative lifestyles.

members participate in the maintenance of the house, women who cannot afford to pay for their room and board perform the heavier household work and cooking.

The *chai t'ang* offer funeral ceremonies for members and often run "death benefit societies" for people who do not become full members. The soul tablets of members are placed in the vegetarian hall. Thus one of the functions of the vegetarian houses is to provide a missing kinship role, a role that is fulfilled in Canton by women shamans who adopt the spirits of women who died before marriage. Spirits that would otherwise be homeless and neglected after death are given a place not found in the secular family structure. Marjorie Topley describes how women who joined vegetarian halls of the Hsien-t'ien sect (先天大道) had "the opportunity to be worshipped as an 'ancestor' by religious 'families' (a 'master' and her or his disciples), a privilege not granted unmarried or childless women in secular society" (Topley 1975:76).¹⁵

Another incentive for women to join these sects was leadership opportunity. Vegetarian houses may either be opened by a nunnery, by a group of women or by a single woman who acts as the head vegetarian. Such opportunities to administer or even to have complete authority over a hall motivated women to join the Hsien-t'ien sect which was a semisecret millennial religion whose highest deity was a mother goddess. In Canton, one local sect was led solely by women (Topley 1975:74).

Many women used the example of the Goddess Kuan Yin to explain their decision not to marry, a difficult one in Chinese society where the failure to have children is regarded as the most unfilial act. In the Miao-shan (妙善) legend Kuan Yin was a princess who refused to get married and became a Buddhist nun against the wishes of her father.¹⁶ The figure of Kuan Yin enabled women to feel that "refusing to marry is not morally wrong and even that religion can help those brave enough to resist; that men

15. According to Marjorie Topley, the semisecret Hsien-t'ien sects in the foothills of the Canton Delta were part of a "syncretic religion called Hsien-t'ien Ta-Tao: The Great Way of Former Heaven (行天大道). These sects appear to have had connections with the famous White Lotus Rebels. . . . The syncretic Hsien-t'ien religion is messianic and millennial. . . . The sects held a particular appeal for women. The highest deity is a "mother goddess". . . . Moreover, the religion stressed sexual equality, and men and women sat together in prayer" [sic] (Topley 1975:74).

16. See Glenn Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978), for more on Kuan Yin as a female deity in China.

cannot be trusted; and that suicide is a virtue when committed to preserve one's purity" (Topley 1975:75). Thus religion was an important tool for women to assert their independence.

MARRIAGE RESISTANCE: REAPPROPRIATION OF RITUAL BELIEFS

In Canton, communities of women who did not wish to marry took on a more rebellious form in the Marriage Resistance Societies. In many villages, it was a tradition for unmarried girls to live together in a communal dormitory. Marriage was so feared that girls mourned for their sisters who left to get married as though at a funeral. Marriage laments expressed the desire to avoid marriage and compared the departure from sisters to death. Blake records one lament which read:

Today I and my sisters become separate persons,
Take separate paths, have separate things . . .
Departing, extinguished and lost.

(Blake 1978:19)

In the *Pu lo-chia* (不落家) movement, the "women who do not go to the family" refused to go to live in their husbands' homes after marriage, choosing instead to remain virgins and stay in the girls' dormitory (Topley 1975:67).

This practice had been in existence since the early nineteenth century and lasted about a hundred years. It was common only in those areas of the Canton delta that were engaged in sericulture: Shun-te, Nan-hai, the Hsi-ch'iao foothills and P'an-yu (Topley 1975:68).¹⁷ It was made possible because of the silk industry in this area which allowed women to earn money to support themselves and to buy a concubine to provide their husbands with children, effectively paying off the husband's family in return for their freedom.

Another form of marriage resistance involved women who remained unmarried,

17. In these areas witchcraft was also associated with the marriage resistance. "According to Dyer Ball, 'they were taught by the nuns' and vegetarian women 'to kill their husbands by saying certain charms or incantations' . . . informants said that a woman who intended to leave her husband without consummating the marriage tucked charms in her underwrappings to ward off his advances" (Topley 1975:81).

and became *tzu-shu nu* (自梳女) "women who put up their own hair" (Topley 1975:67). These women underwent a ritual initiating them into adulthood in which they put up their hair like a married woman, invited relatives to a banquet and announced that they were now as if married and could not be forced to marry. The *tzu-shu nu* organized sisterhoods of women who took vows of chastity in front of a deity. The fact that women worked in the fields and in the mills, often contributing money to their natal homes, made it easier for parents to accept this type of arrangement.

In the silk production process, unmarried women were highly valued because pollution beliefs barred married women from silkworm rearing, caring for cocoons, and the thread-loosening process. Women who were unclean because of childbirth or pregnancy could damage silkworms. Pollution beliefs also provided an incentive for chastity. One of the religious texts (*pao-chuan* 寶卷) frequently read by the occupants of the girls' dormitories taught that a woman is punished for the sin of childbirth after death by being cast into the "Bloody Pond" of birth fluids (Seaman 1981b:381, 388, Topley 1975:75). Only through ritual can she be rescued. Paradoxically, as Seaman points out "to be saved, she must have sons, for how else would there be someone to drink from the bowl?" (Seaman 1981b:396) Celibacy had both practical and mystical advantages for women, as Topley writes:

These women emphasized the religious advantages of celibacy: a celibate woman could assume a high rank in a sect and have many disciples: She could learn esoteric practices to protect her in her journeys about the countryside (e.g. against rape): and she could assure herself a better fate in the next life (Topley 1975:79).

Sisterhood was one of the most important factors besides economic opportunity that enabled women to build a degree of autonomy. Women in this area formed particularly strong bonds with other women, becoming sworn sisters (*shuang chieh-pai* 雙結拜). Topley found that many factors promoted sisterhood in this area: women worked together in teams in silk production; lived together in girls' dormitories; and often belonged to the same sectarian "family" (Topley 1975:76). Some sisterhoods in the Shun-te area arose from the desire of married women to prevent their husbands from taking concubines (Topley 1975:77). Lesbianism was also a feature of some sisterhoods and girls' dormitories. Religious ideology was used to explain the occurrence of lesbianism. A woman would be predestined to marry the same husband in each incarnation; occasionally her partner would be incarnated as a woman but the couple would be fated to be lovers despite this fact (Topley 1975:76). Avoidance of

heterosexual relations and childbearing was an important motive for many marriage resisters.¹⁸

The movement for marriage resistance was not just a source of negative power that enabled women to escape marriage, but a positive power that enabled women, particularly those who chose to become lesbians, to gain erotic and economic independence. Yet, as Luce Irigaray writes of female separatism, "might not the renunciation of heterosexual pleasure correspond once again to that disconnection from power that is traditionally theirs? Would it not involve a new prison, a new cloister, built of their own accord?" (Irigaray 1985:33). Celibacy did involve a disconnection from the traditional power of the Chinese woman that derived from the uterine family. But for most of the participants that Topley interviewed, who held a genuine distaste for heterosexual relations, it was a cloister preferable to the prison of traditional marriage.

Marriage resistance was accepted by the community because it did not threaten to destroy the marriage system of the patriline. It was the use of religious ritual that allowed the resistance to be incorporated into the social fabric. Topley shows that in other regions of China where women also had the opportunity to work in industry, families were more reluctant to allow a daughter to live unmarried away from home because of the risk of losing her and her earnings to a man. "In the resistance area, however, the system of sanctions and beliefs surrounding institutionalized celibacy make such defections unlikely" (Topley 1975:87). Thus religion was an important means for these Cantonese women to create meaningful lives.

By allowing the resistance to become institutionalized within the male society through ritual, women were able to preserve their autonomy. The sisterhoods and vegetarian houses represented the best means for women to use resources within the existing social structure to develop new institutions to create a degree of autonomy for themselves. Religion was one of the primary tools in this process. Only by taking a strict vow of celibacy before a deity could a woman retain her independence. The *tzu-shu nu* used the coming-of-age ritual of putting up her hair to authenticate her statement that her parents no longer had any claim over her and that she could never be married. The reappropriation of the ritual that was used to announce a woman's

18. According to Topley, by the early 1900's almost every family in the area had at least one daughter as a *tzu-shu nu* (Topley 1975:81).

marriage and entry into adulthood, enabled women to use a socially accepted means to prevent themselves from being forced into an unwanted marriage. Suicide was the only recourse for girls in other areas.

CHASTITY AS A POWER:INSPIRATION OF THE GODDESS

Celibacy gave the marriage resisters and vegetarians (*chai ku*) both mystical powers and real power to create independent lives. Religion was a key tool that enabled them to do this, for while celibacy was condemned by patriarchal, Confucian society, it was sanctioned by religion. The inspiration of the pure, virgin goddesses pointed the way for women to disassociate themselves from pollution by rejecting marriage. The fact that unmarried women were not believed to be pollutive, for example in silk production, may indicate that it was not menstrual blood itself that was polluting, but its connection with women's social roles as wives and childbearers. Only the virgin Mother Goddesses who did not give birth, but were mothers of all, represented purely positive femininity. By looking at the place of goddesses in Chinese religion, we can see how women derived power from the female deities to create spiritual and personal autonomy.

There is a correspondence between the Chinese pantheon of folk cosmology and the hierarchy of the imperial bureaucracy. The higher level, exalted gods rule over the larger regions while the lower gods administer local systems. This conception of gods as supernatural governors is common to the territorial cults, although each community has its own idea of the ranking of the pantheon.¹⁹ Lineage or village celebrations of a deity's birthday are held in order to seek wealth, an abundance of descendants and family harmony. These are the public rituals in which men play a dominant role. Ahern found that in Ch'i-nan (溪南) Taiwan, women were only allowed to take a leading role in worship of the low-ranking supernatural spirits such as the "little low goddesses" such as Cu-si: Niu-niu (註生娘娘), the Bed Mother (Ahern 1975:182).

19. Jordan found that the only god whose position was universally recognized was the Joade Emperor, who is at the top. Otherwise, he says, "in any given region there is a general sense that such and such a god is 'high' . . . and that because of this he may have advantages that make it easier for him than for some lower god to accomplish certain things a petitioner wants him to do" (Jordan 1981:41).

Aside from the territorial-cult temples (*miao* 廟) there are an abundance of temples with no specific territorial associations. Buddhist deities in particular are among those who are not recognized as supernatural governors and thus fall outside the bureaucratic hierarchies of the territorial cults. Female deities are also disqualified from the celestial officialdom due to their gender. Sangren found that female deities are important in major religious cults such as Buddhist temples (*ssu* 寺), religious pilgrimage centers, and sectarian cults that are not connected with territorial groups. Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu and Wang Mu Niang-niang are examples of prominent female deities (Sangren 1983:6).

Kuan Yin the bodhisattva has been widely acknowledged as the most popular Chinese deity (Sangren 1983:6). According to the Miao-shan legend of 1100 (Sangren 1983:7, see also Dudbridge 1978), a young princess, not wanting to be subject to the pollution and burden of marriage, decided to renounce marriage and become a Buddhist nun. Her father had her killed for her defiance of his wishes. After her descent into hell, Miao-shan's true identity as Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, was revealed, whereupon she freed the souls tortured in hell. Returning to earth as a mountain recluse, she found that her father was ill and offered him her own eyes as a cure. As her father realized the truth of her divinity, she entered nirvana.

Ma Tsu is one of the most important deities in Taiwan, an island of fishermen and sailors, for she is the protectress of the sea. In Fukienese "ma-tsu" means grandmother (Thompson 1979:61). Tens of thousands of Taiwanese make the island-wide pilgrimage to the main temple in Pei-kang to bring the image of Ma Tsu from their local temple back to the mother temple in the same way as a bride makes her annual visit to her natal home.

The Eternal Mother, Wang Mu Niang-niang, is the supreme deity in a number of heterodox sects. Cult members believe her to be both created before and superior to all other deities including the Jade Emperor. Members of the cult are her adopted children. Spirit possession, revelation and secret rituals are prevalent in the cult (Sangren 1983:10).

All three of the important female deities that Sangren examined were pure because they escaped the pollution associated with marriage yet preserved their status as mothers. Sangren believes that:

The relationship between female-pollution beliefs and women's social roles becomes evident when these beliefs are juxtaposed with those pertaining to female deities. . . . As idealizations of womanhood, then, female deities must overcome the stigma of pollution associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, death, and childbirth. Hence, analysis of the purity of female deities serves to highlight what is polluting in women (Sangren 1983:11).

These goddesses then could serve as models for a positive and radical rejection of wifehood such as occurred in the marriage resistance. The *pu lo-chia*, like the goddesses, were able to avoid the pollution incurred through sexual intercourse and child-bearing and at the same time to maintain their status as mothers in the descent lines of their husbands through concubines. The ideal of female purity that the goddesses represent, requires a rejection of the role of wife, an embracing of the role of mother, and a fulfillment of the role of filial daughter. Although Sangren emphasizes the model of the pure mother aspects of the goddesses, for the *tzu-shu nu*, the goddess as celibate daughter (Kuan Yin and Ma tzu) may have been equally inspirational. Moreover, the inspiration of the pure Mother Goddesses that led women to escape the pollution of marriage was not unambiguously positive. In the words of Luce Irigaray, "she is undoubtedly a mother, but a virgin mother; the role was assigned to her by mythologies long ago. Granting her a certain social power to the extent that she is reduced, with her own complicity, to sexual impotence" (Irigaray 1985:30). Nor are the goddesses themselves unambiguously positive despite Sangren's assertion that the goddesses "embody the purely positive aspects of womanhood" (Sangren 1983:14).

According to Sangren, the positive aspects of womanhood are related to the unifying power that women have in the family as mothers and sisters who act as mediators between authoritarian fathers and sons. The danger and pollution associated with women arise from their devious power as wives and daughters-in-law who may agitate for early split of the family. Sangren believes that:

. . . seen in light of this bifurcation of women's roles in domestic groups, the sharp contrast between idealized feminine characteristics embodied in female deities, on the one hand, and female pollution, on the other, becomes more intelligible. It is their unifying role, particularly their role as mother, that corresponds to the symbolic significance of female deities (Sangren 1983:15).

Certainly the unifying role of the mother is central in many female deity cults. The mother is all forgiving and all embracing, and the cults of the Mother Goddess, in

contrast to the male territorial cults, do not favor insiders over outsiders. Thus cults centering around goddesses tend to foster unity among various social groups and can come to have a political role. Sangren found that the pilgrimage cults that focus on female deities tend to be more popular and numerous. Ma Tsu functions as a symbol of the pan-Taiwan pilgrimage community, which has an "ethnic and potentially political tone" (Sangren 1983:16). In this aspect, the female deities also embody woman's potential for divisiveness. Ma Tsu unifies the Taiwanese while creating a distinction between Taiwanese and mainlanders that could serve as a focal point for ethnic rivalry or for a Taiwanese consciousness that would threaten the political order.

In the case of the Eternal Mother, "intriguingly, the female deity of the sectarian cults seems to embody a subversive dimension of motherhood lacking in the [cults of Kuan Yin and Ma Tsu]. The subversion in this case is based on an alliance between mothers and children against fathers" (Sangren 1983:21), such as is formed in the woman's uterine family. These disruptive alliances are reflected in the relation of the Eternal Mother to her children, and the potential for these sects to become political forces against the state can be understood by analogy to the threat of the uterine family against patriarchal authority. The threat extends to the religious hierarchy as well. Sangren writes that "the millenarian ideology of sectarian cults explicitly challenges the superiority of male celestial bureaucrats" (Sangren 1983:22). Thus the Eternal Mother clearly embodies the disruptive threat to the patriarchal order that women represent in male ideology. Sangren's claim that goddesses "condense only the positive attributes of female gender" and that their "purity and perfection" can be explained as a "consequence of a symbolic separation of women's unifying (positive) and divisive (negative) roles" obscures the real two sided power of the goddess as a unifying force and threat to the established order.

Sangren believes that the relation between female deities and the celestial bureaucracy mirrors the relation between women and patriarchal authority.²⁰ In the case of Kuan Yin, it is the mediating power of the mother that is valued and is the source of the goddess' power. In the case of the Eternal Mother and, to a lesser extent, Ma Tsu, it is the mother's power to create a uterine alliance with her children that threatens to subvert patriarchal family and religious structures as well as the political order. Thus

20. See Sangren, 1987 for discussion of structural relation between deities and human relations.

female goddesses embody both the divisive and unifying capacities of women, and it is not necessarily only the positive, unifying potential of the feminine that is valorized in female deities, as Sangren claims. The subversive elements of goddess worship are just as vital to Chinese religious life as are the mediating effects of female deities. In fact, Sangren acknowledges that the challenge to order represented by the goddess plays a substantial role in Chinese religion.

. . . female deities are important (perhaps even necessary) counterpoints to the heirarchical, bureaucratic orthodoxies of state religion, territorial cults, and ancestor worship. By providing a ritual focus for solidarity among worshippers not united by formally recognized patrilineal or territorial ties, the cults of Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother make Chinese religion more than a sterile reification of the social order (Sangren 1983:25).

Even more extreme, the focus on a female deity can create a solidarity among worshippers that leads to rebellion against the social order, or state, as in the case of the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804).

THE EMPOWERMENT OF RELIGION

Thus not only do women use religion as a tool with which to create their own lives, but also bring that creativity to religion. Women searching for sources of creativity found models for social change in the images of the pure goddesses which led them to reject the pollution of marriage and childbearing. Religiously motivated celibacy was the only path by which independent women were able to gain acceptable status in the community. In the case of the shamans, non-celibate women used their relation to the gods to gain power and authority in the community as well as to make a living for themselves. The image of the goddesses in their subversive aspects could also be motivations for women to become involved in rebellions against the social order as in the Hsien-t'ien sects of the Canton Delta.

While religion can be a powerful creative tool for women despite the pollution taboos which restrict their participation in ritual, is it at times a barrier to innovative reform of the system? Did the same set of religious sanctions that enabled the marriage resisters to protest marriage also prevent them from developing a revolutionary

challenge to the system? Is religion only a means of gaining limited power within the structure? In the case of the vegetarian women, nuns, and marriage resisters, the use of religiously motivated celibacy offered a way of gaining power and autonomy, but by a means that involved an implicit acceptance of the pollution of women's bodies. Although these women were able to transcend their traditional social roles, they were not able to escape the male ideology. Thus we see religion continuing to play its dual role as a source of creativity and oppression.

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宗教與中國婦女地位的轉換

鄧 津 華*

(中 文 摘 要)

本文探討中國大陸、台灣以及新加坡地區的民俗宗教信仰，並提出宗教並不僅是壓抑婦女地位，其實也是她們發揮創造力的力量，並轉換了她們生活上的不平等地位。

宗教的禁忌禁止經期中或有身孕的婦女接近與神祇有直接聯繫的媒介，但在此同時，婦女卻能將自身的污穢轉變成符咒而施之於男性，這便是婦女能改變自身環境成為有利條件的實例。在中國大陸、台灣及新加坡某些地區，女神師扮演村民跟神祇媒介的角色而享有特殊的地位。在廣州及新加坡，有些婦女選擇出家生涯以便逃避婚姻而保持了在姐妹會中的獨立生活。十九世紀時，珠江三角洲便出現了此類姐妹會發展成反婚姻運動；她們利用宗教儀式角色得到社會大眾對她們違反傳統行為的認可，研究女性神明的象徵可以得知婦女所能取得的特殊地位以及她們在所處的文化環境中為了創造有利條件而須憑藉的行象。

本文結論在於：中國婦女雖然能通過宗教形式轉換她們在生活中的地位，但在此過程中她們同時也間接認同了社會上對婦女的消極定義。因此，婦女是否真正能逃避男性社會的壓抑這個問題還需再作檢討。不過，無可否認的，宗教對婦女並不純粹是一種壓抑的力量，婦女可以通過宗教管道創造有利的生活條件。

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RELIGION AS A SOURCE OF OPPRESSION AND CREATIVITY FOR CHINESE WOMEN

(ABSTRACT)

This paper will examine Chinese religion and folk beliefs in various regions of China, Taiwan and Singapore to demonstrate that religion functioned not only as a source of oppression, excluding women from important religious worship, but also as a source of creativity, enabling women to gain power unavailable to them in secular culture.

Religious taboos surrounding menstruating women or women in childbirth prevented women from gaining direct access to power associated with a constant and close relationship to high or pure gods. At the same time, women could turn the power of their pollution around on men, in the form of black magic charms, to destroy the ritual power of male cults. This was one form of negative power to which women had access. In other regions of China, Taiwan and Singapore female shamans gained power in their communities as ritual intermediaries between village inhabitants and the gods and ghosts. In Canton and Singapore, women joined vegetarian houses in order to avoid marriage and maintain autonomous lives in a community of sisterhood. This type of female community developed into a marriage resistance movement in the Canton Delta in the nineteenth century. Marriage resisters used religious ritual to gain social sanctions for their unconventional behavior. An examination of the symbolism of female deities sheds light on the kinds of power attributed to women and on the images available to women as models in their struggles to find tools in their cultural environments with which to create fulfilling lives.

This paper asks whether women could find any elements within existing religion that could enable them to escape oppression and gain power in their communities, concluding that it appears that women who empowered themselves through religious means, did so at the cost of implicitly accepting the negative beliefs about woman's

nature. Thus it must be asked whether women can ever fully subvert or escape male gender ideology. Most importantly, this exploration of the diverse attempts at creativity in different regions of China demonstrates that religion was never a wholly oppressive force but also offered women the means to create meaningful lives for themselves.

Key words: Women, Religion, Sexuality and Reproduction, Goddesses, Taboo.