

Of Mothers, Goddesses, and Bodhisattvas

Patriarchal Structures and Women's Religious Agency

In the past, Yongjia [Wenzhou] women did not venture out of the house without good reason. It was shameful if a woman showed her face at the magistrate's office or engaged in business in the market. This was the charm of local customs, and those who observed the rule of women's seclusion were honored in local gazetteers, bringing glory to their families. We do not know when they became mesmerized by Buddhism, so that now, seven or eight out of ten women have fallen under its power. It started out with poor and old women gathering at home with Buddhist nuns to eat vegetarian meals and chant Buddhist scriptures. Now it does not matter whether they are poor or wealthy, young or old, these women transgress all the rules of propriety. They ceaselessly construct altars and shrines to ten thousand buddhas and indulge in extravagant vegetarian banquets. They empty out their purses and spare nothing in generously giving out alms. How can this be proper feminine virtue? Can we find someone in charge of local customs to control these women, and prevent them from widely disseminating this custom? They are violating the law of the "Three Obediences" [to one's father, husband, and son]. Only by prohibiting these customs can we hope to stop them from spreading wildly out of control.

—*Yongjia County Gazetteer*, Qing dynasty, 1879

在昔,永嘉婦女無故不出戶庭,恥向官府與行鬻於市,此其為俗之美。載諸邑乘者,炳若也。夫何邇歲以來,婦女之耽溺佛教者,十居七八。始惟寒微之家,哀邁之嫗,修齋誦經於室,或僅招一二尼予往還而已。今則無論貴賤之家,老少之輩,踰閑越度,匪但修萬佛之社,具伊蒲之筵。抑且傾囊倒橐,以事布施,畧不憊惜。是豈婦道之宜然哉。安得司風化者,挽其澆俗。有不從者,罪及三從。設為厲禁,或者既倒之瀾。

—(永嘉縣志)清光緒八年

As the disapproving voice of the male gentry writer above reveals, in late imperial Wenzhou there were patriarchal requirements that women stay at home and not venture outside. The Neo-Confucian cults of feminine chastity and

virtue to restrain women's dangerous sexuality were especially strong in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Carlitz 1994; K. A. Johnson 1983). The patrilineal kinship structure also had an interest in patrolling women's sexuality and reproduction to ensure correct paternity and descent and avoid disrupting lineage inheritance and unity. Orthodox Confucianism's disdain for Buddhism is also evident in the above epigraph. We also learn that in the late Qing, larger social developments must have triggered a movement by Wenzhou women to exercise religious agency by organizing public Buddhist gatherings and making generous donations (Kang 2016).¹ The result was women eluding the strict Neo-Confucian gender regulations for female seclusion. Thus, it would seem that in the late Qing, Wenzhou women's religious piety offered a countermechanism and relief from the Confucianized kinship system.

Today, 130 years later, after vast social transformations, rural Wenzhou women have a reputation for being a bit more conservative and traditional than in many other areas of China. The older generation of peasant women received much less formal education, and they comprise the vast majority of rank-and-file worshippers and temple volunteers. Religious leaders in Wenzhou, however—the Buddhist and Daoist temple abbots, the lay heads of volunteer temple committees, and of course lineage leaders and secular state officials—are overwhelmingly men, with the notable exception of Abbess Wan Ru of the Taiping Buddhist Temple. Everyone I spoke with agreed that women were more likely than men to be religiously devout (*qiancheng*, 虔誠) and to spend more time engaged in devotional activities, such as chanting Buddhist or Daoist sutras, making offerings or attending temple rituals, and volunteering their labor at temples, monasteries, and religious festivals. Women are also more frequent donors to temples and monasteries, although male entrepreneurs occasionally donate huge amounts.

Given the ubiquity of women's religious participation today, this chapter tackles the question of how to conceive of rural Wenzhou women's religious agency. A key question is: Does women's religious agency contribute to strengthening, adjusting, or transforming patriarchal structures? By "patriarchal structures," I mean social structures, whether discursive or institutional, that regulate and promote social actions that privilege men over women and cause both to valorize men's roles and points of view. The chapter further explores the issue of Wenzhou women's nonconfrontational negotiation of gendered social norms. A related question is whether religious practice today empowers women in a similar way to that described in the epigraph. Finally, what social effects has women's religious agency had within Wenzhou society?



Figure 8.1. Observing Geng Shen Day: women devotees sit through the night in the Town Center Hall Buddhist Temple, Yongzhong Township, 2010. Photo by the author.

GENDERING THEORIES OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The quest for theories of agency emerges out of a sense that many theories of power may be too top-heavy and overbearing, ignoring the role of agency exercised by individuals or social groups. Attention to agency recognizes that human actors do not always carry out the injunctions and regulations of power orders; rather, they calibrate and calculate their behavior according to shifting historical conditions or contingent situations. Thus, while patriarchal structures of social life have long and deep historical legacies, they still need to be implemented, reproduced, and transmitted down through the ages by women and men agents. In other words, structures do not exist except in their instantiation through the performances and actions of myriad social agents in a given time and place. As both Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1976, 1979) have shown, agency cannot be automatically subsumed to structures of power; it always has a relative independence and contingency.

Agents are always acting in a given situation, historical time, and sociopolitical context; thus, their actions involve strategic calculations about whether, when, and how to operationalize the rules of structures of power. Giddens has emphasized that “*all reproduction is necessarily production . . . and the seed of change is there in every act* which contributes toward the reproduction of any ‘ordered’ form of social life” (1976: 102). In emphasizing every act of social reproduction, Giddens foregrounds the agency of actors and the dependence of structures on those agents’ (often imperfect) implementation of structural rules. Giddens uses the term “structuration” (1979: 61) to draw attention to the temporal, processual, and contingent nature of structures that unfold in real times and places.

Bourdieu counters the formalism and structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and other forms of “objectivist knowledge” by emphasizing “strategy” and “bodily *habitus*.” Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, defined as a “system of durable transposable dispositions” or actors’ “improvisations” (1977: 72), seeks to bring the body into discussions of agency. Although initially cultivated as part of childhood socialization, in the ritualistic culture of rural Wenzhou *habitus* is reinforced through frequent ritual performance and customs. Wenzhou women’s religiosity is better captured by the notion of bodily *habitus*, for pious women engage in regular meditation, sutra-chanting, and ritual movements that, on the one hand, impart religious bodily discipline and, on the other, may give rise to unexpected miracles of seeing, or physically sensing, and, in the case of spirit mediums, embodying divinities and gods.

The question of agency has also engaged scholars working at the intersection of gender studies, religious studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies. Feminist theorists of religion have grappled with the issue of women’s agency in patriarchal religious traditions (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012). Some difficult questions that have emerged include: How do we understand women’s religious acquiescence to patriarchal expectations? Does a feminist outlook require secularization? Do current definitions of agency privilege a modern Western autonomous individual subject who resists power? Patriarchal orders are maintained by both male and female agents. Just as the primary agents of footbinding were mothers who pushed their daughters to endure the pain, so also I found that for many older rural women growing up in Maoist China, it was their mothers who prevented them from attending school. Thus, we have to understand how female agency works historically to reproduce, as well as to reconfigure or derail, patriarchal structures.

Compared to urban Chinese women, rural Wenzhou women seem less responsive to discursive exhortations about social behavior in the media,

whether by a declining “state feminism” from the Maoist era or by the new consumer sexuality. They continue to cultivate traditional virtues of modesty, deferral to men, and religious piety, virtues that are internalized, then expressed and reproduced more bodily than consciously. For example, back in 1993 I attended a village opera performance of the Buddhist-themed *Journey to the West*. Several people told me that the person who organized the event, collected the funds, and hired the performers was “a very capable strong woman.” The phrase “strong woman” (*nüqiangren*) is not really a compliment; most rural women do not wish to earn this title. When I congratulated this woman for her organizational achievement, she immediately denied it, saying, “No, it was not I who organized this—it was all my husband’s work!” Having cultivated modesty and been tutored for years to avoid outperforming her husband, her embodied habitus was self-effacement. Nevertheless, without claiming credit, this woman had quietly orchestrated an opera performance that helped in reconstructing local religious civil society.

Here Giddens’s distinction between “discursive” and “practical consciousness” (1984: 4–14) is especially relevant in addressing the socially conservative agency of pious Wenzhou women. “Practical consciousness” is a tacit knowledge of social norms and routines that allows agents to carry on with everyday life without having to reflect on or question every act. “Discursive knowledge” develops when social acts and routines must be explained to a non-native, or elicits social reflection or even questioning. For Giddens, agency that is involved in structuration, or the process of reproducing social structures, often works through “practical consciousness.” In rural Wenzhou, where Communist inroads were lighter than elsewhere in China, women’s conservative agency is informed more by “practical consciousness,” the taken-for-granted ways inherited from the past. During this transitional post-Mao period when “discursive” state feminism has declined and the resurgence of an older explicit Neo-Confucian patriarchal discourse has been kept at bay, cultural conservatism has renewed itself. Meanwhile, Western-style “discursive” liberal feminism has appeared in some urban college education, but it has not made major inroads here. Thus, we can see similarities between Giddens’s notion of “practical consciousness” and what Bourdieu called habitus, which are both nondiscursive forms of structured agency, although the latter emphasizes bodily inculcation.

Writing about the women’s Islamic piety movement in 1990s Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2005) has criticized the narrow definition of women’s agency put forth

by Western feminists such as Judith Butler. Mahmood suggests that women's agency cannot be understood or defined solely in terms of resistance, counterdiscourse, or rebellious acts, but must also take into account the modesty, self-effacement, and self-sacrificing ethos of pious and socially conservative women such as those in the Islamic piety movement. She shows how social action for these pious women depends on a paradoxical cultivation of docility and submissiveness. Our understanding of women's agency must be broadened to include the ethos of submission to social norms, self-discipline, and religious self-cultivation.

Mahmood's theoretical intervention allows us to account for agency in more traditional cultures and conservative religious practices. Indeed, the majority of rural Wenzhou women today, especially those over thirty, also cultivate modesty, self-restraint, and domesticity and believe that men are more capable than women in the public sphere. They certainly do not engage in the liberal feminist or individualistic discourse of resistance to the patriarchal order. However, unlike the piety movement in Egypt, and perhaps due to the strength of the secular and formerly Revolutionary Chinese state, Wenzhou women today are not exposed to a voluble patriarchal discourse explicitly counseling female subordination. Of course, Chinese patriarchal culture survived the Revolution, but it works less overtly than Islamism. Thus, in rural and small-town Wenzhou, neither an explicit patriarchal nor a feminist discourse is prominent, while the strength of traditional culture means that both male and female agents unconsciously reproduce older gender habitus.

I certainly welcome Mahmood's innovative insight that pious and socially conservative women exercise important agency and that women's agency cannot be defined by resistance. However, in her focus on a critique of Western liberal feminism, her work at times seems to implicitly abandon feminist inquiry into non-Western religiosities. For me, there are different kinds of feminist discourses and multiple paths of postcolonial feminist inquiry. We need to explore and help construct non-Western feminisms or hybrid feminisms that issue from *within* a native culture and align with certain features of native religiosities. The aim is to discover forms of women's agency and their conditions of production that may lead to a native feminist or women-centered religious development (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012). Since these prowomen agencies already exist as potentialities or practices within existing structures, they do not have to be invented wholesale or anew, nor do they have to explicitly reject or belittle native religiosities. That is to say, *non-Western pious women do not need to become secular, nor do they need to become Western-style feminists in order*

to modify patriarchal structures. Furthermore, the “discursive consciousness” of new hybrid feminisms can build on and expand some already existing forms of women’s agency. Thus, Mahmood’s postcolonial critique of Western feminist discourse represents only the first step in our inquiry, not the end. The next step is to identify and explore the different forms of native women’s agency, in an effort to help build native feminist discourses from already promising preexisting forms and potentialities.

Perhaps due to her aversion to resistance theory, Mahmood did not sufficiently theorize the paradoxical *social effects* of conservative women’s religious agency on gendered power structures. This is evident in her account of Abir, a devout and conservative woman who ignored her husband Jamal, who opposed his wife going out to join the piety movement (Mahmood 2005: 176–180). Although all Muslim wives are, under Sharia law, bound juridically to obey their husbands, Abir was able to skirt her husband by claiming the moral high ground of being more devoted to God than was Jamal, who drank alcohol and prayed infrequently. Thus, Abir’s conservative religious agency had the ironic effect of undermining the Sharia institutional privileging of husbands over wives. While Mahmood is keen to focus on the conservative *intentionality* of Abir and other Egyptian pious women, she undertheorized how Abir and pious Muslim women’s agency might affect structures of power. Here we could borrow Giddens’s idea of “the unintentional consequences of intentional conduct” (1984: 12). Abir and pious women had the intention of perfecting themselves before God through prayer and obedience to Islamic patriarchal social norms. They did *not* set out with the *intention* of opening the public space of the mosque to women, or of challenging their husbands’ authority, but these were some structural effects of their religious agency. Similarly, I will attempt to show that “unintended consequences” provide an important window of observation for linking up Wenzhou women’s religious agency with the larger structurations of power. We will explore how nonliberal and nonfeminist forms of conservative intentionality and practice among Wenzhou women not only reinforce patriarchal structures but also modify and recalibrate them.

INNER AND OUTER: GENDERED DOMAINS IN WENZHOU TODAY

Returning to the late Qing, we have another account written in a different text—*Nine Sayings about Eastern Ou*—that confirms the importance of Wenzhou women’s religious agency:

甌俗婦女入廟燒香及出門游覽，略不避人，習以為常。
溫忠翰 (東甌九說).

According to local customs in Ou [Wenzhou], women can go out to temples to burn incense and outdoors for leisure and travel, without having to avoid people. This practice is so common it is normal. (Wen 1879: 17, cited in Hu 2000: 105)

Vincent Goossaert (2008) has shown that in the Shanghai and Jiangnan region, local writers in the late Qing were also describing similar women's religious outings as a new trend. As in Wenzhou, large numbers of women were quietly violating Neo-Confucian prohibitions against women venturing outside the home. Goossaert detects a tension between the disapproval of Confucian officials and gentry, and the larger "moral consensus" of local commoners, ordinary peasants, Buddhist and Daoist clerics, and spirit mediums, who had no problems with women visiting temples (2008: 234). We can surmise that, perhaps due to discourses of reform flowing into China from Japan and the West, traditional power structures in nineteenth-century Jiangnan and Wenzhou were being shaken. As they started to lose their authority and rigidity, these conditions enabled a movement of devout women going on religious outings in groups. Ironically, just as women were starting to exercise religious agency more frequently in public spaces, thereby unintentionally resisting Confucian patriarchal culture, the winds of secular nationalism started to shut down the religious arena, with its potentials for religious forms of women's public engagement (M. Yang 2008b).

When women went out to crowded festivals or enjoyed outdoor operas, late imperial texts often sounded an alarm that "men and women mingled together indiscriminately" (*nannu hunza*, 男女混雜). This gender mingling defied the strictures of Neo-Confucian controls over women's sexuality and its promotion of female chastity and sexual fidelity. I submit that women's display of religious devotion allayed male concerns about women's sexual purity. There is something pure and nonthreatening in women's devoutness and service to the gods and buddhas. A single unescorted woman wandering public streets filled with men can be read as a sexual provocation. However, when women travel in groups to temples with a devout mission, their sexuality is diminished by their religiosity. Devout women are thought less likely to indulge in adulterous liaisons, and they are associated with notions of purity and sacrality, an association that helps women overcome their status as polluting elements in traditional Chinese notions of menstruation and blood from childbirth as defiling (Ahern 1975). Thus, women in late Qing Wenzhou and Jiangnan were able to deploy

their religiosity and piety to carve out a public space for themselves in local temples. This is an important path through which the nonoppositional agency of pious women can gradually reshape the power structure of gender relations.

In rural Wenzhou today, Maoist state feminism did not penetrate deeply. Women who grew up in that era received only one or two years of formal education, if any. Most older women do not speak Mandarin, and they had arranged marriages. Today, they run family businesses and easily leave the home to go shopping and visiting with friends. Living in prosperous times, younger women are much better educated and have many opportunities to work in the public sphere and experience upward social mobility. However, the traditional gendered division between the “inner domain” (*nei*, 内), or women’s domestic sphere, and the “outer domain” (*wai*, 外), where men should dominate, along with the phrase “inner and outer should be differentiated” (*neiwai youbie*, 内外有别), continue to resonate. There is still a public zone beyond which women are discouraged from going. Women who travel out of town by themselves, spending nights away from home, are looked down on as “immoral,” and gossip may belittle their husbands as cuckolds. Several women entrepreneurs said this cultural restriction posed professional difficulties, and they have either avoided travel or quit their occupations in order to conform to social mores. If they have to travel, they will often go with a relative or female friend. In family enterprises, it is usually the husband or adult son who travels on business, and the wife who stays at home attending to the family business. While both pre- and extramarital sex relations have greatly increased, the negative consequences for women far exceed those for men. However, as in the opening epigraph, women today can get around this spatial restriction by traveling in groups with their “sisters” to visit temples across the land, and by gathering funds to support temples and religious events.²

FIVE MODES OF WENZHOU WOMEN’S RELIGIOUS AGENCY

In my fieldwork, I uncovered five different modes of women’s religious agency, which are presented below. These modes are not mutually exclusive, for they wax and wane through time, and different modes can combine in the actions of a single individual. Since most rural Wenzhou women now live in a society undergoing “re-enchantment,” sometimes their religious agency is porous to forces of supernatural agencies, or interacts with or models itself on them. Even though Wenzhou women usually have no intention to change or challenge patriarchal structures, sometimes their religious agency can lead to unintended social and religious consequences. That is, women’s religious and

ethical pursuits, their modesty, self-cultivation, and self-sacrifice, may ironically lead to shifts in the patriarchal structures of power.

1. Women's "Conservative" Agency and Their Contribution to Patriarchal Structures

The first kind of agency generally stays within the strictures of patriarchal structures, serving to reproduce and sometimes even strengthening them. For example, in rural Wenzhou there is a common understanding that women are more religious than men because of their "lack of will or decisiveness." In January 2012, I asked Tao Fengqiao, a lay Buddhist woman, why it seemed that women in Wenzhou were more devout and active in religious worship than men. Tao answered that women's personalities are more "soft and flexible in nature" (*rouxing*, 柔性), while men tend to be "hard and firm" (*gangqiang*, 剛強), so women need to rely on the gods more than men, who are more independent. Here women are believed to turn to the gods and bodhisattvas for help in bolstering their weak will or lack of self-confidence. I would also add that women seek help from the gods when they encounter difficulties conforming to the requirements of patriarchal structures, and the gods often counsel forbearance with regard to patriarchal power.

Zhou Xiulan, a middle-aged woman who separated from her husband but could not bring herself to divorce him for fear that people would gossip, often seeks solace in the gods. Her fate has not been good. Her husband sometimes beat her, and debt from his uncontrollable gambling resulted in a family catastrophe: they lost their house. As a single woman, she must now work as a live-in caretaker of an elderly man to send her daughter to technical school and to save money for her son to get married and pay for the bride-price and house. But whenever she meets with a setback in her life, she said, she never blames the gods. Instead, she thought that maybe in a previous life she had done something bad to incur punishment in this life. "The gods give me spiritual support [神給我精神支柱。]," she told me. She prays to the highest god, the Jade Emperor, and his mother, and also to Bodhisattva Guan Yin, the Three Great Officials (*sanguan dadi*, 三官大帝), and lower local gods.

Sun Xiaohua, a sixty-five-year-old Buddhist lay woman, explained to me that women are more devout than men because women are more "compassionate" (*cibei*, 慈悲), self-sacrificing, and filial than men. She told me the story of Guan Yin's selfless compassion and unwavering filial piety:

Guan Yin went against her father's wishes and refused to marry the man he chose for her. She wanted to go become a nun in the monastery, and

this enraged her father, who had her killed. Even though her father was brutal and she suffered at his hands, she was still so filial. In the Nether World [*yinjie*, 陰界], when Guan Yin heard about her father's illness, she rushed back to her father's side. She noticed that he had a big boil on his face. She knelt down and used her mouth to break open the boil and suck out the pus. When she spit the pus out, a beautiful lotus flower came out of her mouth! Guan Yin also gouged out her own eyeball to help her father see better, and she cut off her own hand to feed him. She was so filial!

Ms. Sun reveals her conservative female agency by clearly identifying with the self-sacrificing agency of a filial daughter instead of with Guan Yin's marriage resistance, which appeals to feminist scholars who discuss her story (Yü 2001: 333–338).³ Indeed, one could say that Guan Yin's initial resistance to being incorporated into the patriarchal marriage system is neutralized or repaired later by her return to her father and her reincorporation into the patriarchal family. Here we can see that religious culture can certainly be a conservative force in steering women to identify with self-sacrificing agency and persuading them to stay in unhappy marriages.

2. Self-Cultivation and Transcendence

Instead of trying to fit within patriarchal structures, some women seek release and escape by checking out of society and family and engaging in religious “self-cultivation” (*xiuxing*, 修行). In the dormitories of the Auspicious Efficacy Buddhist Monastery in Cangnan County live about thirty lay Buddhist women, ranging in age from their midforties to their seventies. Each had paid 10,000 yuan to purchase a room in the monastery dormitories, which they now called their permanent home. I asked Ms. Su and Ms. Lai why they wanted to live in the monastery. They replied that they wanted to escape “the endless Wheel” (*lunhui*, 輪迴) of Birth, Life, and Death:

This temple environment is very good for us to engage in cultivation so that we can become buddhas [*xiuchengfo*, 修成佛]. Through constant meditation, chanting of sutras, crying out the Buddha's name, and doing good deeds, we will rid ourselves of all the dirt in our hearts. Then we can become pure and float up to the top like a lotus rising out of the mud.

These women engaged in a highly disciplined regimen of Buddhist self-cultivation. Every morning they got up between three and four in the morning to meditate for forty-five minutes to an hour, followed by the chanting of a Buddhist sutra—often the Amitabha Sutra (阿彌陀經), a key text of the

Pure Land sect (*Jingtuzong*, 净土宗) of Mahayana Buddhism. They then ate their breakfast and then spent the day performing their chores: laundry, food shopping, cleaning, and so forth. If the monastery was preparing for a Buddhist ritual or festival, they helped with preparations. They also participated in charitable activities and on wildlife-releasing trips (*fangsheng*, 放生). Around five in the afternoon, they cooked and ate their dinners, and then some went out in small groups for a leisurely walk in the park next door. Others retired to their rooms to read or watch a little television. Around eight, they engaged in the “evening session” of meditation and sutra-chanting. They led a simple life both materially and emotionally, attempting to free themselves from the distractions of family and the pursuit of wealth.

Ms. Su and Lai both observed that life is harder for women. “Everyone wants to be a man in their next life. We no longer want to be a woman, because the life of women is too hard,” said Ms. Su, the older woman, with a hint of bitterness. I asked the two women what aspects of being a woman were especially difficult for them, and they offered these examples: giving birth, raising children, dealing with their husbands, and not being able to leave the house as much as they wanted because household chores tied them down. “Sometimes we just wanted to leave our unhappy lives!” said Ms. Lai. They said that they envied women who could go to college. They believed that they were women in this lifetime as a punishment for neglecting self-cultivation in a previous (male) life. Moreover, Ms. Su explains, “if you do not cultivate yourself, then you will not become a man in your next life. You might not even come back as a human being! You know, in the Western Paradise, all souls will become male.” Ms. Lai recounted how her friend personally saw the corpse of a recently expired woman when he attended a relative’s funeral. It had only been about a day since she had died, and he was startled to see a mustache growing around her mouth. “He saw it happen on her face!” marveled Ms. Lai. “She was becoming male because she will soon be entering the Pure Land!”

There may be a certain gender appeal for Ms. Lai and Ms. Su in the way that Buddhism sometimes invokes gender neutrality or fluidity. Indeed, in the Amitabha Buddha’s *Forty-Eight Vows*, Vow 35 is that Amitabha would not attain buddhahood until all women who wished to renounce womanhood and attain Enlightenment could be reborn as men after death. Here, Pure Land Buddhism seems to explicitly acknowledge the unique sufferings of women in this world. It offers a path of liberation quite different from a modern secular sensibility toward gender injustice: through gender reversal in one’s next

life. Similarly, in the Lotus Sutra (妙法蓮華經), the key scripture of the Tiantai Sect of Buddhism, centered just north of the Wenzhou area, we have a passage about a girl attaining buddhahood. Manjusri, or Bodhisattva Wenshu (*Wenshu pusa*, 文殊菩薩), tells another bodhisattva named Wisdom Accumulation how the eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king Sagara has attained enlightenment due to her meditation, understanding of the dharma, and compassion. Wisdom Accumulation protests that he does not believe that a girl could achieve enlightenment. Even when the girl appears before him to assert her attainment of Bodhi, he still refuses to believe, saying,

A woman's body is filthy, it is not a dharma receptacle. How can you attain unexcelled Bodhi? The path of the Buddha is remote and cavernous. Throughout incalculable *kalpas*, by tormenting oneself and accumulating good conduct, also by thoroughly cultivating the perfections, only by these means can one then be successful. . . . How can the body of a woman speedily achieve Buddhahood? (Hurvitz 2009: 184)

Whereupon, before the assembled multitude, the dragon girl immediately turns into a man. With perfected bodhisattva conduct, she sits "on a jeweled lotus blossom, and achieve[s] undifferentiating, right, enlightened intuition." All those who witness her buddhahood are "overjoyed at heart."

From a secular feminist perspective, one feels uncomfortable with this Buddhist teaching that the only way for women to gain enlightenment is to become men; it implies that women are inferior or innately impure or immoral. Even when Buddhist teachings seek to be inclusive, with messages about gender equality, the "soteriological inclusiveness presupposes (and reinforces) gender discrimination" (Faure 2003: 94). Nevertheless, until the divine arrival of radically new scriptures that are women-friendly, Ms. Su and Ms. Lai must work within the parameters of Buddhist teachings handed down for centuries. What is crucial is their particular interpretation of Buddhist teachings, the form that their agency takes, and its structural effects. The religious agency of Ms. Su and Lai is one of recognizing gender inequality and acting on that knowledge by adopting a pathway available to Buddhist women seeking release and salvation. They engage in self-cultivation as a technology for transcending both the suffering of this temporal life and Buddhist constructions of female gender.

On another occasion, I asked Ms. Lin whether she identified with Guan Yin because this Buddhist deity was female. She answered, "We women do not pray to Guan Yin just because she is female. We pray to all of the buddhas. The buddhas and bodhisattvas are beyond male and female. They are

both genders, or they are neither, or they are a thousand genders [又可以是男性女性, 又是没有性, 又是一千個性].” Pure Land Buddhism seems to harbor another kind of gender fluidity or neutrality, a transcendence of the gender binary on which patriarchal structures depend. While scholars have focused on the gender transformation undergone by the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from a male image into a maternal Buddhist deity in tenth-century China, there are very few studies on the gender transformation of ordinary lay Buddhists, or of Buddhist teachings on gender reversal or gender fluidity across lifetimes. This is an important area of inquiry that awaits further fieldwork and textual studies.

Ms. Lai and Ms. Su are painfully aware that their parents’ denial of an education for them has disadvantaged them in their adult lives. They experienced difficult married lives and struggled to cope with the traditional female duties of caring for children, husband, parents, and parents-in-law. The strategy they have chosen for cultivating their piety is to leave the patriarchal family, their husbands and children, to live a sex-segregated life with other women in pursuit of personal salvation—what Albert O. Hirschman (1970) has called the strategy of “exit,” over “voicing” their complaints, or remaining “loyal” to marriage and family. While their intentions and actions neither challenge nor overturn existing patriarchal structures, their religious agency can be understood in a number of ways. First, toward the end of a difficult life, these women finally have time to attend to their own spiritual quest for salvation through self-cultivation practices that seem also therapeutic. Second, by removing themselves from patriarchal family and kinship structures yet not inserting themselves as nuns into a different patriarchal order, the Buddhist sangha, these women gain a certain self-direction in their lives. Third, in voting with their feet and distancing themselves from the ordinary pursuits of the temporal world, these women’s religious pursuits have allowed them to transcend the burden of female gender, providing entry into those realms of Buddhist cosmology that are gender neutral or third gender, or that can lead to gender reversal.

This lay Buddhist women’s community resembles the medieval Christian institution of *beguinage*, one of whose building complexes I visited in Antwerp, Belgium. *Beguinage* were lay Christian women’s communities housed in dedicated buildings, which started in the twelfth century in the Low Countries and persisted across Europe into the early twentieth century (Swan 2014). Like *beguinage* women, these lay Buddhist women carried out charity work and lived segregated from the wider society, but were able to move in and out of their walled compound.

3. *Constructing Religious Sisterhoods and Women's Community*

A third mode of women's religious agency is the construction of lay women's communities. These women live with their families but form "sisterhoods" through their shared spiritual attachment to Mother Chen or Bodhisattva Guan Yin. These rural women "form into groups or federations" (*jiebai jiemeng*, 結拜結盟) of ten, named "Worshipping with Ten Sisters" (*bai shijiemei*, 拜十姐妹) (Chen Q. 2014). These sisterhoods were likely inspired by the immortal sisterhood alliances that Goddess Mother Chen (陳靜姑) formed with other female deities when she finished her Daoist martial arts and shamanic training and descended from Lü Mountain (Yu B. 2007: 40). This process is described as "forming friendships to promote the Way" (結友行道). Mother Chen's two main sister deities are Mother Lin the Ninth (Lin Jiuniang, 林九娘), whom she saved from the Lake of Blood in the deeper recesses of Hell, and Mother Li the Third (Lin Sanniang, 李三娘). Together with Mother Chen, they comprise the cult of the "Three Mothers" (Sannai, 三奶), as shown in figure 8.2, where the three goddesses lead a spirit army battling demons. Brigitte Baptandier (2008: 46–53, 123–141) also describes Mother Chen's thirty-six "sister assistants" (*pojie*, 婆姐), who were concubines at the ancient court of the Kingdom of Min in Fujian. Some of these sisters were saved from misfortune by Mother Chen, while others were demons that she converted to the correct path. They endured hardship and fought alongside Mother Chen as her spiritual army.

As a Party member and former Women's Federation cadre in her seventies, Ms. Tang said that she does not completely believe in the gods. Nevertheless, she belongs to one of these sisterhoods. She first joined her group in the early 1960s, when she was twenty, and her "sisters" all worked together in the kitchen of a giant communal canteen during the Great Leap Forward. At that time, they dared not voice allegiance to Goddess Mother Chen. Over the years, she and her sisters took turns sending each other off to their weddings. Before the wedding day, the sisters would get together to "drink wedding wine" (吃囍酒) and enjoy a banquet at the bride's natal home (娘家). If one member was in need, the others would lend money to her, visit her in the hospital, or even help her take care of her ailing mother-in-law. The sisters have stayed together for over four decades, although three of them have passed away. These sisterhoods continue to be formed among teenage girls today, said Ms. Tang.

Wenzhou folklore scholar Chen Qiu (2014) describes a group initiation ritual of these sisterhoods in rural Yueqing in 2013, which took place in Mother Chen's temple on her birthday, the fourteenth of the first lunar month. The head Daoist priest wrote down each sister's name on a piece of yellow paper,



Figure 8.2. Scroll painting (dated 1892) depicting Mother Chen and her two sisters charging on horseback with drawn swords, leading their spirit army to battle demons. Photo by Thomas Pavia, who donated painting to UC Santa Barbara University Art Museum.

and he enjoined the sisters to help each other throughout life. The women swore to support each other like blood sisters. Then the paper was burned in the incense burner, and firecrackers were released to announce this sisterhood oath. The ten sisters took turns each year hosting a banquet, called “drinking the wine of prosperity” (吃福酒), to celebrate Mother Chen’s birthday.

Younger-generation rural women continue this sisterhood tradition today, but some have become more secular, as reflected in their new term for sisterhoods: “*identifying* with ten sisters” (認十姐妹), instead of “*worshipping* with ten sisters” (Chen Q. 2014). Some younger sisterhoods have even changed their annual banquet from Mother Chen’s birthday to the Lunar New Year, when their far-flung sisters outside Wenzhou return home. Another generational difference is that younger women may go on collective excursions to places much farther from home. Older sisterhoods generally traveled to Mother Chen temples within the Wenzhou area or, at most, to Buddhist temples on Putuo Island (普陀山). In the current era of commercialization and globalization, younger women generally have jobs and extra spending money, so they can travel farther away with their sisters. This travel is sometimes more leisure than religious travel, to major scenic and historical sites across China or to Southeast Asia, Taiwan, or Europe. Their husbands often encourage them to go out, since they do not feel threatened when their wives are in the company of other women. Thus, continuing a pattern from late imperial times, Mother Chen lends legitimacy for younger women to travel far from home and even outside China.

I heard of a similar rural sisterhood devoted to the worship of Bodhisattva Guan Yin, called “Walking the Forty-Eight Vows” (走四十八愿). This phrase commemorates the Scripture of the Buddha Speaking of Infinite Longevity (佛說無量壽經), where the Amitabha Buddha swears forty-eight oaths to save myriad souls and build a virtuous and beautiful Buddhist state. Buddhist lay sisters rent a van or truck and “go to eight Buddhist temples” (過八寺), trying to visit all eight in one or two days. They usually go on a major Buddhist festival day, such as Sakyamuni Buddha’s birthday on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month.

These religious sisterhood associations enable women to construct a women’s community around worship activities, allowing women to give each other emotional as well as material support in times of need (Chen Q. 2014). When women get together to enjoy periodic banquets, they can confide in each other about their family problems and share information about important resources and opportunities in the changing market economy. The sisterhoods also allow women to travel together without worrying about people

gossiping. They carve out a public space for women, strengthening women's public activities.

4. The Divine and Defiant Agency of the Warrior Goddess Mother Chen

It goes without saying that the divine agency of gods and goddesses is much more powerful than that of ordinary mortals. Gods are omnipotent beings who intervene in the cosmic movements of the universe, fate, and human existence, while human beings are weak and dependent on the gods' whims and favors. Most patriarchal cultures seem to have no problems with harboring powerful and assertive female deities, such as Guan Yin in Chinese Buddhism, Kali in Hinduism, the Catholic saint Joan of Arc, and Goddess Mazu in southeastern China (Sangren 1983; Yü 2001). This may be because most women do not serve as mediums for channeling these powerful goddesses or seek to model their own agency after the goddesses, so the goddesses pose no big threat to patriarchal power. Yet goddesses and their cults may sometimes undermine or transcend male-dominant social orders. Such was the case, I argued, of Goddess Mazu and her Taiwan pilgrims who crossed the Taiwan Straits to her ancestral temple in Fujian, a journey that compromised the male-dominated spatiality of the triumphant nation-state by foregrounding the matrifocal regional and local spatiality of temples descended matrilineally from the ancestral temple on Meizhou Island (M. Yang 2008a).

I wish now to examine Goddess Mother Chen's (陳十四娘娘) supernatural agency: How is this divine agency expressed, and how does it inform or shape the female agencies of her religious subjects? A goddess's human subjects may interpret and identify with the goddess in multiple ways. Historically, women mainly adopted the first mode of agency discussed above, identifying primarily with those aspects of a goddess that did not challenge patriarchal power; Ms. Sun, for example, was inspired by Guan Yin's filial self-sacrifice rather than her mischievous or commanding agency. Thus, the fourth mode of women's religious agency involves women identifying with and partaking of the boldness and rebelliousness of a goddess such as Mother Chen. This fourth mode of agency remains a potentiality rather than actuality, for I met almost no women in rural Wenzhou who explicitly adopted this mode.

The Wenzhou tales of Mother Chen present this goddess with distinctly *unfeminine* qualities that depart from traditional notions of women's virtue as being soft-spoken, retiring, and ladylike (賢惠). This is a feisty goddess who proves herself much more capable than her shaman father and two brothers Faqing and Fatong, all of whom failed to slay the two snake demons harassing the local people. Like the Bodhisattva Guan Yin and Goddess Mazu, Mother

Chen also resisted an arranged marriage to a man chosen by her father. When her parents insisted on this marriage, she fled far from home, to the legendary Lu Mountain (閩山), apprenticing herself to Daoist masters of the Lushan School, where she learned martial arts fighting skills and exorcistic and magical technologies. On returning home and finding her parents very ill, she relented and married the man they had chosen for her, out of filial piety. However, her marriage and pregnancy did not cramp her style. She continued to gallivant around the countryside, riding on clouds and doing battle with demons and monsters to help the weak and needy across Fujian and Zhejiang. With her generous spirit of helping others and upholding justice, she even defied the higher gods. In a move reminiscent of the rebellious Monkey King God or “Great Sage Who Is Equal to Heaven” (Qitian Dasheng, 齊天大聖), Mother Chen dared to challenge the highest divine sovereign, the Jade Emperor himself.

In the following passage from *Marvelous Tales*, Goddess Mother Chen learns that the community of Dingzhou in Fujian Province has experienced a terrible drought and needs a shaman to perform rituals to bring down rain. To protect her unborn fetus from the exhausting rain ritual she is about to perform, she takes charge of her own body’s reproductive process, performing a magical ritual to remove the fetus from her body so she can leave it in a safe place:

[She] perform[ed] the magical technique of “cutting open the womb and extracting the fetus.” Shaking the divine bell in one hand, she grasped the divine knife in the other, and then gently sliced into her abdomen with one stroke. Her flesh and muscles automatically split and opened up. Gently she reached into her womb, took out the fetus, and placed it into a basin. Her flesh and muscles then automatically closed and fused together, leaving no scar. Mother Chen put the fetus in the basin on the bed and covered it with the dustpan. She shut the bedroom door. (Ye Z. 1985: 286–287)

Mother Chen then flies to Dingzhou to ritually summon the rain, but two Thunder Gods order her to stop, on orders from the Jade Emperor himself. Ignoring this imperial edict, Mother Chen demands an audience with the Jade Emperor. She flies up to Heaven and forces her way into the Jade Emperor’s court.

In a great rage, Mother Chen demanded, “You are the Jade Emperor; you say that you protect the people of All-under-Heaven; why is it that Dingzhou has not seen a drop of rain for three years? . . . How can you see death

all around and not try to save people?!” The Jade Emperor said, “The people of Dingzhou cursed and swore at Your Highness, so I am punishing them for their irreverence.” Mother Chen retorted, “This three-year drought, in which parents witness their own children die of exposure to the sun, and children watch their parents die of thirst, and husbands gaze at their wives dying of hunger, how can this human tragedy *not* drive a person to blame Heaven and chastise Earth? In my opinion, Heaven, you are not at all just! You *should* be chastised! You Earth, you are not moral, you *should* be cursed! You ruler, you are not humane or upright, why do you keep on punishing the people?” This angry tirade left the Jade Emperor speechless, and he sputtered, “Chen, the Fourteenth! How dare you . . . ! You have violated Heaven’s Regulations, and I will punish you by decreasing your life span by nine years . . . !” Mother Chen replied, “If you still do not bring down rain, I will again slash your Thunder Gods . . . I, the Fourteenth, don’t care if you reduce my life span to nothing!” (Ye Z. 1985: 290–291)

Since the Jade Emperor has nothing else to threaten her with, he reluctantly sends down to Dingzhou a hard, driving rain for three days and nights, bringing salvation to the people.

Unfortunately, the cunning snake demon, alerted to Mother Chen’s aborted fetus, sneaks into her room and swallows the baby. Furious, Mother Chen chases the snake demon back to its cave lair in Gutian County (古田縣), Fujian. Sadly, as she rides astride the snake demon’s head and finishes him off, her body, weakened by exposure to the cold rain, collapses from overexertion. Before she dies, she vows, “After I die and become a god, I will save all those women undergoing difficulties in childbirth!” After her death, she was immortalized (羽化) and ascended to Heaven (Pan E. 2001: 115).

There is a significant contrast between the unladylike image of Mother Chen as a fierce, sharp-tongued goddess and the way she is worshipped today by most rural Wenzhou women, who focus on Mother Chen’s dying utterance about helping women in childbirth. In the early 1990s, when I first started conducting fieldwork in Longwan District, many temples devoted to Mother Chen were quite small. Mothers who wished to conceive or were expecting a baby would place a small clay figurine of a baby in front of Mother Chen so that the goddess would grant them a baby or ensure a successful birth.

I asked many women what they admired about the goddess, and whether they saw in her adventurous spirit a model that would inspire them to defy social convention and change society for the better. Their answers brought me down to earth from my unrealistic feminist flights and longings: they looked

to Mother Chen to protect their children and families. One woman in her thirties thought about my question and frowned, saying, “Not really, Niangniang does not make me want to change society. It’s more like I look up to her spirit of sacrificing for others [爲他人的奉獻精神].” Most women, that is, identified with her maternal and self-sacrificing qualities, adopting the first mode of female agency. They did not approach her as an assertive female model after whom to fashion themselves. Mother Chen’s daring and militant prowess are seen as part of her supernatural power, not as a power that ordinary mortal women might imitate. Thus, the fourth mode of women’s religious agency, identifying with Mother Chen’s defiance of power structures and her battles for social justice, exists, for now, mainly as a potentiality in the local religious culture.

5. Pious Women’s Initiative, Temple-Building, and Leadership

Had I simply accepted everyone’s declaration that women worship Mother Chen or Guan Yin by seeking divine protection for their babies and families, I would have concluded that these goddess cults were irremediably embedded in patriarchal structures that tied women to reproduction and domestic life. However, further exploration turned up an unexpected way in which women exercised agency through their worship of deities. Some women take the initiative to accumulate funds and lead the establishment or restoration of temples and religious organizations. Sometimes their initiative is triggered by divine inspiration in a dream or a visitation from a deity. At other times, it is in gratitude for a god’s divine assistance. In this process, women come to assume a leadership role in local religious communities. However, once the organization or temple grows larger and more socially prominent, the tendency is for men to take over the reins of leadership. I stumbled on a significant number of women who displayed initiative and leadership qualities in their piety. Just as women shamans often assume the role of resacralizing abandoned small temples (see chapter 6; M. Yang 2015) as the “initial spark” that brings down the gods and reactivates temple and community religious life, pious women’s agency plays a significant role in initiating the construction of new temples and founding new religious associations. Below are three examples of this fifth mode of women’s religious agency.

Building a Statue of Mother Chen

Nanjiang Village in Cangnan County had an old Qing dynasty deity temple built around the incense ashes brought back from Mother Chen’s ancestral temple (祖廟) in Gutian, Fujian Province. It was a rare distinction to have a

direct connection with the pilgrimage center, but the temple was abandoned after the Communist Revolution. It was a diminutive sixty-eight-year-old woman, Huang Jianying, who in 1979 brought the dilapidated old temple back to life. Back then, the old wooden Qing temple was tiny and decrepit, with only an image of the goddess painted on the temple wall. Although illiterate, Ms. Huang, along with six other village women, thought that the villagers needed a proper statue to embody Mother Chen's spirit, so they took the initiative to collect funds to erect a new statue of Mother Chen and, later, to restore the Qing temple.

That year, 1979, was not far beyond the religious destruction of the Cultural Revolution. "Wasn't that a politically risky thing to do, to build a goddess statue back then?" I asked Ms. Huang. "Maybe Mother Chen's example of killing the snake demon gave you courage?" She nodded proudly and said, "Yes, I was very bold back then, and Mother Chen's example gave me courage. So I mobilized [發起來] the other women to build the statue together." They each donated their own money and went from house to house collecting additional donations. Only the Christian families declined to donate. A few years later, a fierce typhoon hit Wenzhou, so she got up in the middle of the night and made her way to the temple, amid howling winds. There she threw the one-hundred-pound statue on her back and brought Mother Chen home to protect the goddess from the rain running through the leaky roof. Later, she even made a complete set of silk robes for Mother Chen to wear.

I asked Ms. Huang what gave her the idea of erecting a new statue of Mother Chen. She replied that her husband was a shaman (僮生) and that one night, as he slept quietly next to her in bed, she saw a female figure standing beside his bed, leaning over him. "Mother Chen entered his body, right in front of my eyes," said Ms. Huang. This divine possession caused him to jump up and start shaking and uttering words she could not understand. This miracle motivated her to build the goddess statue, but it was a long time before she dared speak openly of what she had seen.

The seven village women who erected the statue and restored the tiny temple went on to manage the temple for many years. Later, however, the gender balance of power shifted. In 2014, when the old Qing temple was torn down and renovated, the new temple committee (廟宇委員會) composition was changed to fourteen male villagers, with a rotating leader for managing the temple and ritual festivals. Indeed, it seems that although women often initiate construction of a new temple or statue, afterward, as the temple membership and finances expand, male temple committees step in to take over the management. When a temple reaches a certain size and wealth, it

inevitably attracts the attention of local state agencies, who require that the temple be absorbed into the state system of temple governance. Men are better positioned to negotiate with officialdom, because local state bureaucracies are dominated by men. Nevertheless, it is often a group of uneducated women who start up a new temple or statue building, and their bold initiative emerges paradoxically out of their pious wish to honor a god or goddess's spirit of self-sacrifice.

A Charismatic Buddhist Peasant Leader

Ms. Chen was a sixty-one-year-old peasant woman who led a Buddhist grassroots revival movement in a town in Cangnan County. Ms. Chen had a broad honest-looking face, and her frequent smiles had etched deep wrinkles around her eyes. She did not receive much formal education, and her Mandarin Chinese was hard to follow. She was not raised Buddhist, and for much of her life she did not believe in the Buddha. In her late twenties, she fell gravely ill, and the doctor told her that her illness was very difficult to treat. In despair, she wanted to "pray to the Christian gods," but as chance would have it, a visiting family friend who was a vegetarian persuaded Ms. Chen and her mother to pray to the buddhas instead. Once Ms. Chen prayed to the buddhas, she started feeling better, and the abbot of a nearby Buddhist Temple also conducted a ritual of sutra-chanting for her. After the ritual, Ms. Chen experienced the miracle of full recovery and became a devout Buddhist.

In order to spread Buddhist teachings, in 1984 Ms. Chen "mobilized" (發動) everyone around her, her kin network, her fellow villagers, and surrounding villages to gather to chant and study Buddhist sutras. She relinquished her role in the family grocery business, giving it to her husband so she could devote herself full-time to starting up her sutra-chanting association. She opened up her home to anyone who wanted to join her in chanting. At first they had a small group of only about forty to fifty people who could all fit into her house. Later, the numbers grew rapidly and they had to gather in several neighboring houses. Soon they had to "accumulate funds" (集資) to purchase a new house dedicated to their sutra-chanting meetings. In 2004, they purchased a large house under her name for 100,000 yuan (over \$16,200). The majority of their members had peasant household registration, but they also included people who lived in nearby towns. The new house had a couple of rooms that could accommodate long-distance visitors, sleeping overnight on cushions laid out in tight rows on the floor. Today their gatherings attract 300 to 500 people for each meeting, and their total membership has reached over 800 people. The Buddhist Study Group meets on the first, eighth, fifteenth, eighteenth, and

twenty-eighth days of each lunar month, plus on any buddha's or bodhisattva's birthday.

As Ms. Chen told me, "If you sincerely practice 'self-cultivation' (修行), for one day or seven days, your mind will quiet down or attain stillness, and then you can be assured of rebirth in the Pure Land." The three sutras they chant the most often are the Amitabha Sutra, the Great Compassion Dharani (大悲咒), and the Universal Gate of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin (觀世音菩薩普門品), which is the twenty-fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra (妙法蓮華經). Interspersed with the sutra chants are frequent interludes in which the name of the Amitabha Buddha, "O-mi-to-fo!" (阿彌陀佛), is repeatedly invoked. When I asked Ms. Chen what Buddhists feel as they chant, she replied,

When we chant continuously, it often results in "a spiritual response" [心靈感應]. It's like two good friends who have not seen each other for many years, and then one thinks about the other fondly, and at that very moment, the other person also happened to be thinking of her. This sort of spiritual connection is what we can get with the buddhas and bodhisattvas when we chant. We can often reach them and feel the response from the bodhisattva.

The Buddhist Study Group members dress in the black or coffee-colored robes with wide sleeves, called "ocean blue/green" (海青), worn by Buddhist lay initiates when engaged in Buddhist rituals. At each meeting, they cook together to provide two or three meals for the Buddhist worshippers. Occasionally they hold a special kind of gathering called "abstinence from the eight openings" (八關齋戒), in which they close all doors, windows, televisions, and cell phones, ending all communication with the outside world to focus inward on their spiritual path. They often invite a Buddhist monk to lecture on the Buddhist sutras.

Cai Weiming, a lay Buddhist man, extolled Ms. Chen's selfless spirit. He said that she frequently offers assistance at people's deathbeds. She will sit next to the dying person and chant sutras, and after the person dies, she will bathe the corpse and change the bedding. This is considered a great act of kindness (善良心), compassion (慈悲心), and self-sacrifice, since death is regarded as highly polluting. "In our area, often not even a person's own son or daughter is willing to wash the dead body," observed Mr. Cai. He went on to say that Ms. Chen never accepts any "red package" (紅包) or monetary reward for her services. "She is a Buddhist who has a lot of prestige and authority [威望] among the people, because she sacrifices herself for others. She is respected by everyone, so she has the charismatic authority [號召力] to rally people around her," he said enthusiastically.

In Ms. Chen we have an example of a pious saintly female agency. We can see how her dedication, self-sacrifice, and bold initiative have made her a religious leader in the eyes of most Buddhists in her area. Far from plunging Ms. Chen into a retiring domestic role, her modesty and selflessness ironically propelled her to assume community leadership with the charismatic authority to command followers. Her religious agency was crucial in her ascent to leadership because she was not competing with men on men's terms, which are usually secular. She commanded religious authority by outsanctifying and outsacrificing men. Although her intention was religious, to be a devout Buddhist who could help disseminate Buddha's wisdom for the salvation of others, the unintended structural consequence was that a local female religious leader emerged, thanks to grassroots forces. When I visited their Buddhist Study Group's prayer hall in 2016, I found that Ms. Chen had already started grooming her daughter, a Buddhist nun, to inherit her leadership role. Having recently graduated from a Buddhist Academy, Ms. Chen's thirty-year-old daughter was much better educated than her and had the further advantage of being a fully ordained nun. Thus, Ms. Chen's female religious agency and leadership seemed destined for successful transmission to the next generation.

Building a Temple to Mother Chen: Divine Visitations and a Link to Taiwan

My third example of women's religious agency in the form of female initiative and leadership is a peasant businesswoman who founded a temple to Goddess Mother Chen, called the Sacred Palace of Mountain and Water (山水聖宮), in Cangnan County. In September 2014, I talked with Zeng Jinglian (Golden Lotus), the founder of this temple, while her silent and smiling husband sat nearby. Golden Lotus was a self-assured but modest woman in her fifties. She grew up in a small, impoverished mountain village dating back to the Qing dynasty. One year their tiny old temple to Mother Chen was destroyed by a typhoon. They did not have any money to rebuild it, and she resolved that one day she would work to rebuild it. When she was in her twenties, she left the mountain village and went down to the lower plains to become a businesswoman trading in dried foods, and she also ran a food-processing factory.

Golden Lotus told me about how she met her husband and how they joined together to construct the large temple to Mother Chen. When her husband was only three years old, he refused to eat seafood, the basic food in a coastal fishing village. In rural Wenzhou, refusing to eat meat or seafood is often taken as a sign that one is either destined to become a Buddhist monk or nun or has been selected by the gods for a special destiny. Due to his crossed eyes, rare utterances, and slow movements, people often mistook her husband



Figure 8.3. Ms. Chen and her daughter (seated on her right) and the author (seated on her left) in the new Buddhist Recitation Hall, Cangnan County, 2016. Photo by passerby.

for an “idiot” (傻子). Golden Lotus however, was drawn to the strength of his dedication to the gods. She marveled at his sensitivity to the presence of the gods and his accurate premonitions of miracles and events of ritual efficacy (他感念很靈). Before they ever met, he had a dream in which Mother Chen appeared and asked him to find a woman to help him build a temple to honor her. He looked everywhere for this woman without success.

One day he passed by Golden Lotus’s store and said to her, “I have been looking for you for two years. Where have you been all this time? Let’s work together to build Mother Chen a new temple.” At that time, Golden Lotus was ill and not feeling energetic. However, while visiting her home village, she entered the restored village temple and begged Mother Chen, “Do you think I am without ability? Do you find me capable of carrying out this mission? If you can heal me, then I promise I will build you a wonderful temple.” The goddess restored her to health, so she embarked on the long journey with this man to build a temple together. The partnership was a perfect match between a man

whose body was very receptive to divine inspiration, but who was not effective in the practical world, and a businesswoman who, while observing the norms of feminine modesty and piety, also possessed a knack for hard-nosed negotiations and could engage the male world of officialdom.

Golden Lotus has now been married to her husband for twenty years. To build the temple, she sold her house and borrowed 400,000 yuan, using a second house as a deposit on the loan. Bit by bit, she and her husband bought parcels of land from farmers in these mountains. One *mou* of land cost 50,000–60,000 yuan. The village government had to approve each sale of a piece of land, which I took to mean that she had to use all sorts of tactics to persuade and cajole these cadres. She assured me that her temple was entirely privately financed: they did not take any money from any level of government for this temple. Her two daughters gave up all their money for this temple, and her two brothers also each donated 1 million yuan. They used up over 6 million yuan in building the temple, and she and her husband are in debt by over 1 million yuan. Golden Lotus asserts that they have never gone to wealthy entrepreneurs to ask for donations because they did not want other people to accuse them of profiting from the gods. “We only want people to donate if they sincerely want to give on their own, and not out of pressure,” she said. Her friends and relatives have scolded them for not being practical, for going into debt, and for not leaving their hard-earned money to their children. We see in Golden Lotus an intractable will to take a financial risk in the pursuit of a higher divine end. To my question of why she would take this great risk, she replied, “So that the masses can come to burn incense.”

When they started celebrating Mother Chen’s birthday at the temple in 2008, they only had enough attendees—ten—to sit around one round banquet table. In 2016, they put out sixty-five tables, seating 650 people, a dramatic increase in the number of worshippers coming up the mountain to participate in the daylong Daoist ritual (法事). They come to beg the goddess to help them conceive a child, have a safe birth, or gain success in business. In return, they promise that they will volunteer to work on her temple construction or assist at festivals. This is called “giving back for a wish fulfilled” (還願), and it can add up to over a hundred hours of donated labor per person.

In 2012, a Taiwanese man visited her temple. He marveled at her hard work and urged her to visit the ancient ancestral temple of Mother Chen in Gutian, Fujian Province. When Golden Lotus went to Gutian, it happened that a large group of Taiwanese worshippers were visiting, so she struck up a conversation with them. This led to their proposing that her temple play host to a Cross-Strait Cultural Exchange Festival. She came back to her town and reported to



Figure 8.4. Golden Lotus with her husband in their Sacred Palace of Mountain and Water Temple, Cangnan County, 2014. Photo by the author.



Figure 8.5. In this mural at Sacred Palace of Mountain and Water Temple, Mother Chen seeks apprenticeship from Lord Xu, with the help of Guan Yin, who casts a spell on him. Photo by the author.

the Bureau of Ethnicity and Religion (民族事務宗教局) that Taiwanese people wanted to organize a festival to honor Mother Chen, but she did not know how to make it happen. The bureau gave her permission to organize this large-scale event, which took place at her temple in 2013, 2014, and 2016.

I interviewed Tang Shengxi, who attended the first festival in 2013 and took colorful photographs of the event, which he posted on his blog.⁴ The daylong event started in the morning with the opening ceremony, a secular ritual presided by the mayor of the town, who welcomed the thirty or so guests from Taiwan. Next came the main ritual, the Requesting Prosperity Ceremony (祈福大典), conducted in the temple courtyard by local Daoist priests, along with a few priests from Taiwan. The altar featured life-sized statues of Mother Chen, flanked on both sides by her two divine sisters, Mothers Lin and Li. The male priests were dressed in elaborate Daoist garb, some with “skirts” made of hemp cloth, which I had never seen before, and blew on “dragon horns” (龍角), a symbol of the Lu Mountain Sect of Zhengyi Daoism. The fact that these priests were called *saigon* (司公), whirling around in their “skirts” and blowing on horns that were much thinner than elsewhere I have seen in Wenzhou, suggested to me the influence of Fujian culture that had crossed over the provincial boundary. At noon, there was a long ritual procession in which the goddess and her two divine sisters were carried on palanquins (花轎) through the streets of the town.

This was the first time that I heard about any “cross-strait” festival to celebrate Mother Chen with Daoist priests and worshippers from Taiwan. I had heard about cross-strait pilgrimages made by Taiwanese to Fujian Province, such as the visits to the “ancestral temple” (祖廟) of maritime Goddess Mazu and the Monkey King (M. Yang 2008a). However, I had never heard of such pilgrimages to the Wenzhou area from Taiwan. Evidently, seeing how cross-strait religious exchanges were able to stimulate the economy in Fujian, Wenzhou local officials were also starting to promote religious events to link up the Wenzhou economy with Taiwan’s. On the temple wall of the Sacred Palace of Mountain and Water, a giant poster advertised the second festival in 2014 with the secular title “Zhejiang-Taiwan-Cangnan-Chen-Jinggu Folk Custom Cultural Festival.” The sponsoring units listed were the Cangnan County Government; the Taiwan Affairs Office; the Ethnic Affairs and Religion Bureau; the Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, Journalism, and Publishing; the Township People’s Government; and the Office of Popular Religion. The organizing unit was listed as the Cangnan County Chen Jinggu Belief Cultural Association,⁵ a new nongovernmental organization of worshippers. With local government participation, the secularized festival seemed to be implementing

a recent saying: “Religion provides the stage, so that the economy can perform the opera” (宗教搭臺，經濟唱戲). However, for Golden Lotus it was the other way around: promoting business links with Taiwan helps justify and expand her religious goals. The 2014 festival was on a larger scale than the previous year, bringing three hundred Taiwanese visitors instead of thirty. It featured a three-day Daoist *jiao* (醮) community-blessing ritual, to promote harmonious families, good health, and academic success for the people of Cangnan, and good fortune for local industry and business. The poster called on all individuals faithful to Mother Chen, as well as economic enterprises and government offices, to donate to the temple.

Although the poster left out Golden Lotus’s name, it was clear that her handiwork was crucial throughout the first and second festivals. In 2014, she was elected to the position of vice director of the new Cangnan County Chen Jinggu Belief Cultural Association, made up of 170 member Mother Chen temples in the county, most of which were represented by men. The festivals were a brilliant move by Golden Lotus that produced two returns: increasing the religious visibility of the temple to worshippers far and wide, all the way to Taiwan; and promising to increase trade between Cangnan County and Taiwan. Golden Lotus reveals herself as a savvy and ambitious woman, able to build up a whole new giant temple from scratch and launch a series of annual religious festivals–cum–business encounters across the Taiwan Straits. Golden Lotus seemed to be holding her own as a leader of the nongovernmental Chen Jinggu Association, and she and her husband continue to manage their temple themselves. One thing was clear to me: in her diminutive and modest feminine way, Golden Lotus exerted a strong female religious and economic agency in building a local religious institution. She credited Mother Chen’s daring adventures for inspiring her, so perhaps the fourth mode of female religious agency, that of modeling oneself after a goddess, may be developing into an actuality.

CONCLUSION

We started this chapter with the question of whether Wenzhou women’s religious agency contributed to strengthening, adjusting, or transforming patriarchal structures. Having examined the religious agency of many Wenzhou women, we can now conclude that they can produce *all* of these structural effects. In the first mode of conservative female religious agency, certain women believe themselves to be weak and must rely on the gods to help give them strength. They may see, in the exemplary hagiographies of goddesses,

certain feminine self-sacrificing virtues that they respect and choose to model themselves after. Here female agency approaches the gods for relief from their suffering, which is sometimes an outcome of reconciling themselves to patriarchal structures. When women take the gods' advice to be forbearing and accept abusive husbands or unhappy marriages, they enact the first mode of agency, which helps to reproduce patriarchal structures.

The second mode of female agency accomplishes a spiritual release and transcendence from worldly attachments to patriarchal structures, such as the traditional marriage and patrilineal kinship system. By focusing on the work of self-cultivation, pious women remove themselves from both domestic family role expectations, as well as from the distractions of mass media's sexualized images of women in the consumer economy. It may be that Buddhist cosmology, with its features of gender fluidity, gender neutrality, and gender reversal, offers a special escape from the patriarchal structure predicated on the gender binary required for marriage and reproduction. The third mode of female religious agency is the formation of women's sisterhoods and communities that last a lifetime. This form of female agency strengthens women's social bonds, increases women's public space, and provides a refuge for women seeking each other's emotional and material support.

The fourth mode identifies with and incorporates the supernatural agency of forceful female deities for social action in the temporal world. In Wenzhou, this mode remains a potentiality rather than an actually existing form of women's agency. If, one day, this mode were to become prevalent in the re-enchantment of society, it would not require secularization nor a rejection of female piety, but merely a crucial shift in women's approach to interpreting and interacting with goddess figures. This form of female agency would work from *within* the indigenous religious culture to modify patriarchal structures for gender equality, and it would not necessitate conversion to Christianity or secular culture. The key ingredients and resources for a female agency that would help to produce gender equality are already there; they are as yet culturally unrecognized and untapped in the current practices of indigenous religiosity.

Finally, I was surprised to discover an important fifth mode, whereby a pious self-sacrificing female religiosity led to women taking social initiatives and adopting leadership roles in the public sphere. Ms. Huang, who initiated the construction of a statue of Mother Chen and revived the old Qing dynasty temple in her village, practiced this form of agency. The charismatic authority of the living saint Ms. Chen enabled her to start up a local Buddhist study and meditation society of over eight hundred members. Ms. Zeng (Golden Lotus),

who founded a large temple dedicated to Mother Chen and launched a series of religion-and-trade festivals connecting Taiwan with Cangnan County, managed to position herself in the world of men. Often emboldened by divine inspiration, devout women have built new temples or restored old ones, thus launching new religious communities. However, our examples also reveal that it is easier for women to initiate and lead the building of smaller local temples than it is for them to preside over them once these organizations grow larger. Once temple membership and fame grow, the temple must win state approval, register with the local Daoist or Buddhist Association, and accept the guidance of male-dominated state offices. Thus, once a temple becomes successful, it becomes difficult for women to hold on to its leadership. The contrast between Ms. Chen and Golden Lotus is instructive. Ms. Chen's organization, including mainly rural peasant and lower-class faithful, is denied state recognition and, thus, further expansion. Golden Lotus, on the other hand, is better educated than Ms. Chen and is able to participate in the world of male officialdom and religious managers. For now, Golden Lotus and her husband continue to control the temple they founded, but we do not know how long she will prevail in a man's world.

Except for the fourth mode, these ethnographic examples of women's piety in Wenzhou do not show resistance to patriarchal structures, yet they are clearly examples of women's religious agency. Here we follow Saba Mahmood's point that our understanding of agency cannot be restricted to examples of resistance, but must instead encompass nonliberal forms of agency guided by conservative religiosities. Since all processes of social structuration depend on the myriad agents whose actions, beliefs, and discourses reproduce and instantiate structures of power, we also follow Bourdieu's practice theory argument that it is not sufficient to merely analyze structures in terms of their rules, ideals, and expectations. We must also scrutinize the manifold ways in which these structural regulations are implemented or modified through the exercise of human agency in contingent historical conditions. What we have observed is that changes in social structure do not rely solely on the agency of resistance, confrontation, or explicit disobedience; they may also be engineered *from within* a structure of power, through loyal adherence to its ideals and rules. Thus, the women who initiated the building of a deity statue or temple, or founded religious associations or institutions, did so by being exemplars of patience, dedication, and self-sacrifice, which have traditionally been more strongly associated with ideals of femininity.

This unexpected linking of the agency of conservative religiosity with women's religious leadership may be understood in a number of ways. First,

power structures are internally complex, diversified, and contradictory, thus the predominant form of normalized agency often does not exhaust the possibilities of agency in given structures. If historical conditions allow, new interpretations of structural ideals and rules may develop, and new habitus and new forms of agency that do not rely on resistance may bring about structural modifications. This was the case in the increasing tendency for pious women in the late Qing dynasty to leave the domestic sphere to worship in temples. Second, one institutional structure may produce forms of agency that may counterbalance the power of other institutional structures. When religious institutions allow women's participation or spiritual transcendence, women's religious involvement can often compensate for women's disadvantages in the patrilineal institutions of marriage and kinship. Through her loyal agency of selfless acts that endowed her with religious authority, a pious woman like Ms. Chen was able to establish the Buddhist Study Society and deflect patriarchal expectations of women as followers, rather than leaders.

By initiating and leading the rebuilding of temples and religious communities of worship, women's agency has helped open up a realm of religious civil society that negotiates with and counterbalances male-centered state institutions. Here I share Mahmood's postcolonial approach of recognizing multiple forms of female agency, so that resistance does not dominate our understanding of agency. However, her postcolonial critique of Western feminism runs the danger of implicitly closing off feminist inquiry into non-Western religious cultures. We have seen that whatever the intentionality of agency, we cannot always assume that the structural effects automatically align neatly with the conservative intentions of women's agency. That is why we must study not only women's agency but also the unexpected structural effects of their power. The modes of female agency explored here may serve as a basis for the development of alternative forms of feminism that build on and issue from native institutions, traditional culture, and women's religious practices. These forms of female agency may help construct a postsecular and re-enchanted society of both gender difference and equality.