Abstract

The recent interest in gender studies has, not surprisingly, seen a rise in the study of Chinese religion from the refreshing perspective of gender. Thus far, much study has already been done on the interplay between the two genders in various religions. The status of women within a particular religious pantheon and the role of women in shaping the development of a religion are also the center of many discussions.

The focus of this study is on the interrelationship between Taoist women’s effect on the religion and vice versa. Such a focus is not totally new, the existing amount of literature that has already been devoted to the topic is proof enough. However, these previous studies have, at times, overly approached the topic without first demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the religion itself. For example, some academics have, based on the large number of feministic symbols present in Tao De Ching, proposed that the Taoist philosophy represented the earliest form of feministic attitudes to have originated from China. However, in other instances, the Taoist theory of Yin-Yang dualism has even been argued as the basis of modern Chinese feminism.
This study will instead approach the topic in a more pragmatic way through a close interpretation of the Taoist system of belief and religious practice. In Chapter One, the feministic symbols in Tao De Ching will be re-examined in-depth to illustrate that the "Principle of Femininity" found within this ancient text was more a product of its times, which bears little resemblance to the modern day concept of feminism. Chapter Two and Three will focus on female Taoist practices and deities respectively within the Taoist pantheon to specifically examine how the Taoist view of femininity was translated from a theoretical level into the frontiers of Taoist practice and liturgy.

All in all, this study will illustrate that the Taoism’s emphasis on women stems from the ancient philosophy of Taoism itself, and that women have indeed made significant contributions to the development of the Taoist liturgy. Furthermore, this study will also show that Taoist women are not necessarily spared the prejudice that women in other religions are often subjected to. The emphasis of Taoism in this study is only spoken in relation to other Chinese religions and should not be overstated.