Five Gems in the Torrent: Historical Portrayals of Chinese Women in Sound and Religion

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Subject(s): Theology and Religion, Culture and social structure
Published by: Scientia Moralitas Research Institute
Keywords: China; woman; sound; religion; Communism; Nüwa; Pangu; Mulan; Confucianism; Lao Tsu
Summary/Abstract: In the long history of the patriarchal culture of China, women were consistently stigmatized as naïve. What made this situation worse was the mentality that—“a woman who lacks talent is a virtuous woman”—a famous quote, which had become the standard to measure the qualities of a woman. This portrayal was quite permanent throughout the cultural history of China, as even today, this stereotype is still prominent in the poor, rural, and illiterate areas of China. This paper highlights in a
Teaching the history of Chinese religions in a gender-balanced way involves a rather large number of variables. First, of course, there is the fact that one must deal with at least three religious traditions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, each of which itself varies both synchronically (at a given period of time) and diachronically (through time). In addition, there are the following sets of polarities that must be taken into account: discrimination against women, and the patriarchal attitudes that were so deeply-rooted in both the Indian and Chinese cultures that gave rise to and interpreted the canon. The famously ambiguous story of the 8-year old daughter of the Dragon King in the “Devadatta” chapter of the Lotus Sutra can be taken as a symbol of that tension.