

Call for Papers

Becoming a Mother in China: Anthropological, Historical, and Literary Approaches

Venue: Inalco, Paris

Dates: 26-28 April 2027

Keynote Speaker: Francesca Bray (University of Edinburgh)

Conference Theme

In China, motherhood constitutes an essential stage in women's construction as persons. Birth rituals, observed across different historical periods, express and reinforce this conception: they mark a woman's social recognition as a mother and condition her place within the family and society as an 'adult' or 'complete person' (chengren 成人) (Bruckermann 2017; Hou 2024). Marriage rituals, strongly imbued with fertility symbolism, likewise express expectations regarding the future wife's ability to bear descendants (Ahern 1973; Thompson 1988; Formoso 1997; Hou 2024).

Thus, for a woman in China, whether or not she has a child, has a profound—if not decisive—impact on her personal, familial, and social trajectory. Yet it is noteworthy that, from the child's perspective, the mother's role in the construction of the child's personhood and social status, in family transmission, and even in conception and birth appears less central than the father's within the Chinese patrilineal kinship system (Lauwaert 1991). As Brigitte Baptandier explains:

'According to the Confucian canons of ancient China, a woman becomes a mother only by virtue of a man's words: by naming the child, he recognizes his child as a son. Here, it is not the mother who is "certain," but explicitly the father's name, regardless of whether the mother is the birth mother or an adoptive mother. Despite the obvious nature of her role, the mother is already viewed with suspicion and unease. According to these same orthodox canons, women are considered to have nothing to transmit—neither name, nor bone, nor ancestral bond—because they cannot reproduce the identical: the essence of their own lineage, that of their father.' (2012)

Although this Confucian and androcentric vision of motherhood long dominated Chinese family practices, it has repeatedly been challenged, reinterpreted, and even abandoned by many women throughout history. Some women choose—or are compelled—never to become mothers, or devote themselves to religious life (Herrou 2001; Despeux 2022); others, faced with infertility, turn to medicine or alternative practices in an attempt to become—or become once again—mothers (Farquhar 1991; Bray 2008; Shi 2021).

This symposium seeks to examine historical changes in conceptions of motherhood and reproductive practices in China through an interdisciplinary approach drawing on research in sociology, anthropology, history, religious studies, and literature.

Theme 1: One Father, Multiple Mothers: Gender Inequality in Parenthood

In traditional Chinese conceptions of kinship, fatherhood is singular, whereas motherhood may be multiple. In the polygynous families of imperial and pre-Communist China, a child could therefore have several maternal figures: the concubine, or birth mother (shengmu 生母); the principal wife, or social mother (dimu 嫡母); and the wet nurse, or milk mother (rumu 乳母).

In polygynous Chinese families, both wife and concubine were permanent members of the man's household under the rule of patrilocal and virilocal residence, and both reserved their sexual and reproductive rights exclusively for him. Their familial, social, and legal statuses, however, were hierarchically differentiated in several respects:

- 1) They entered the man's household in different ways. The wife was acquired through marriage rites involving gift exchanges that established affinal ties, whereas the concubine was acquired through a purchase contract, a practice known as 'taking a concubine' (naqie 纳妾) (Ebrey 1986, p. 6; Watson 1991, p. 246).
- 2) A man could have only one wife, but could take several concubines (Zurndorfer 2016, p.22).
- 3) A concubine's sons were required to regard the wife as their official and legal mother, while honouring their birth mother to a lesser degree (Ebrey 1986, p. 6).
- 4) The concubine was required to serve and submit to the wife (*ibid.*).

A concubine could thus be regarded as an extension of the wife while remaining subordinate to her, since her reproductive capacities were appropriated by both the wife and the patrilineage (Jaschok 1988, p. 76; Stockard 1989, pp. 48-69; Watson 1991, p. 247). The institution of polygyny reflected not only inequality between the sexes but also a hierarchy among women within the same polygynous household: the wife, as the 'social mother' (dimu 嫡母), was entitled to appropriate the offspring of the concubine, the 'birth mother' (shengmu 生母) (Bray 1997; Bossler 2016). The conception of dual motherhood thus entailed a clearly defined and hierarchical division of maternal labour between two women 'of different social status, [who] could jointly fulfil the biological and social roles of ideal motherhood, at very different costs to each of the women' (Bray 2008, p. 182). Shared motherhood between wife and concubine presented few difficulties from a male perspective, because recognition of dual motherhood served to 'highlight the singular role of the father and thereby reinforce patrilineal ideology' (Bossler 2016, p. 351). This was all the more so because both wife and concubine were institutionalised, incorporated into the man's household, and subordinated to the patrilineal system. Polygynous practice clearly illustrates that 'the birth mother is not privileged among classificatory mothers. The father's words and command make a woman the mother of a child' (Baptandier 2012).

Polygynous marriage was abolished in 1950 after the Chinese Communist Party came to power, leading dual motherhood to disappear from public life. Nevertheless, alternative practices involving a third party in order to have a child did not disappear. Married men

continued to practise non-institutionalised polygyny outside the primary household by maintaining mistresses, some of whom bore children—a phenomenon known as ‘keeping a second wife’ (bao ernai 包二奶) (Lang and Smart 2002; Xiao 2011). The emergence of new reproductive technologies has also enabled some couples to pursue parenthood by engaging a ‘surrogate mother’ (daimu 代母).

What place does childbirth occupy in Chinese conceptions of motherhood? What forms of agency do women involved in alternative reproductive practices develop? What forms do everyday ‘kinship practices’ take when the mother has no biogenetic relationship with the child, as in blended or adoptive families? What happens when women, whether heterosexual or queer, choose to become mothers without being subordinated either to the institution of heterosexual marriage or to men? What happens when a woman deliberately refuses motherhood?

Taken together, these questions concerning diverse reproductive practices in both contemporary China and the past can help us better understand transformations in women’s status, gender relations, and the very conception of motherhood in China.

Theme 2: Motherhood through the Lens of *Metapersons*: Religion as a Space for Reconfiguring Women’s Status

Chinese belief systems provide a distinctive conceptual and ritual framework for thinking about motherhood beyond its biological and social dimensions. They offer an original perspective on the construction of female personhood by introducing mediation with the world of *metapersons*—deities, ancestors, and invisible forces—which participate in the recognition and enhancement, or conversely the marginalisation, of women according to their reproductive status.

Several avenues may be pursued to analyse how religious beliefs and practices shape motherhood. The first concerns divine figures associated with fertility and birth: female or feminised deities in the Daoist or Buddhist pantheons, such as Songzi Guanyin 送子觀音, Mazu 媽祖, and Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君. Veneration of these figures expresses normative expectations surrounding motherhood while offering women symbolic means of intercession (Yü 2001, pp. 247-262; Zhang 2021; Naquin 2022, pp. 106-109 and 410-411, among others).

A second avenue concerns religious texts and rituals, such as the Xuepen jing 血盆經, intended to purify, protect, or symbolically reintegrate women confronted with reproductive risks or failures: miscarriage, death in childbirth, infertility, or the loss of a child (Lhamo 2003; Song 2012; Lei 2024; Ji 2025). These practices reveal how religious traditions extend or adjust social norms through spiritual mechanisms.

A third avenue examines the trajectories of women who are not mothers—unmarried women, widows, or women religious—who find in religion, through ritual charisma, spiritual mediation, or even posthumous divinisation, alternative forms of social and moral recognition (Kang 2014; Despeux 2022). Some of these women, who died young and without descendants, attain the status of ‘divine mother,’ embodying a capacity to

generate and protect life in a spiritual and collective sense (Dudbridge 2004; Baptandier 2008; Ju and Crowther 2019).

While these avenues offer an initial structure for reflection, they do not exhaust the diversity of possible approaches. They correspond, in fact, to three complementary levels of analysis: first, a symbolic consciousness of fertility embedded in a long-term cosmological vision, in which motherhood functions as a fundamental metaphor for the vital principle; second, a set of social and religious mechanisms which, over the medium term, frame reproductive norms; and finally, women's individual choices, which are always situated within these symbolic and institutional frameworks.

This framework raises a central question: to what extent does religion reinforce, modify, or challenge the idea that 'not bearing children means not existing socially'? More importantly, beyond the status of personhood, does it enable some women to attain a higher form of recognition, or even to acquire the status of *metapersons* themselves?

Theme 3: Representations of Motherhood in Chinese Literature

In the Chinese context, literature provides a particularly fruitful lens through which to examine conceptions, norms, and experiences of motherhood. Since antiquity, historiographical, didactic, and literary texts have contributed to the construction and transmission of models of maternal conduct. The *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (*Biographies of Exemplary Women*), the earliest extant biographical collection devoted to women, dedicates its first chapter, entitled *Muyi zhuan* 母儀傳 ("Maternal Models"), to women celebrated for their moral qualities, educational role, and contribution to family continuity. Among them is the mother of Mencius, to whom tradition attributes the famous "three moves" undertaken to provide her son with an environment conducive to his education.

In imperial China, motherhood could confer considerable authority and recognition upon women within the family, particularly through the education of children, the management of the household, and their contribution to familial and lineage continuity. Patricia Buckley Ebrey's study (1993) thus demonstrates the central place occupied by marriage, motherhood, and child-rearing in women's social experience during the Song dynasty, without overlooking the hierarchies of gender and status that continued to shape their lives. Under the Ming and Qing dynasties, the valorization of widow chastity also contributed to reinforcing certain representations of the virtuous mother, responsible for educating her children and preserving the family. Biographical writings, funerary inscriptions, and family narratives preserved the memory of these women while also revealing the constraints and injustices they faced.

At the end of the imperial period and in the early twentieth century, the ideal of the "good wife and wise mother" (*xianqi liangmu* 賢妻良母) was reformulated in the context of projects of reform, modernisation, and nation-building. It assigned women a moral and educational role extending beyond the domestic sphere: entrusted with educating future citizens, mothers were expected to contribute to strengthening the nation. Reformist discourse and late Qing literature nevertheless reveal the ambiguities of this ideal. *The Yellow Embroidered Ball* (Huang Xiuqiu 黃繡球, 1905–1907), published under the

pseudonym Yisuo 頤瑣 and attributed to Tang Baorong 湯寶榮 (1863–1935), advocates women's education and emancipation while situating their agency within a project of familial and national reform. The New Culture and May Fourth movements extended and transformed these debates: motherhood could be denounced as an instrument of women's subordination, but it could also be recast as a social, moral, or national mission. Representations of motherhood thus emerged from a persistent tension between individual autonomy, family responsibilities, and the imperatives of national modernization.

In a China profoundly transformed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—through revolutionary and socialist experiences, the Maoist and post-Maoist periods, economic reforms, shifts in reproductive policies, and conservative resurgences—modern and contemporary literature provides a particularly fruitful field for examining changing representations of motherhood. From Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), Bing Xin 冰心 (1900–1999), and Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986) to Mo Yan 莫言 (1955–), Chi Zijian 遲子建 (1964–), and Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (1973–), these writers offer distinctive representations of motherhood shaped by situated experiences and forms of knowledge, themselves embedded in diverse historical, social, and regional contexts.

We therefore invite contributions addressing a number of questions: How do modern and contemporary literary works represent maternal bodies in contexts of social and political transformation? How do they negotiate the tensions between women's autonomy and familial, social, or national expectations? In what ways do they portray the effects of state control over reproduction, birth policies, and reproductive rights? What relationships do they establish between individual procreation, family continuity, and social reproduction? Finally, how do they represent mother–daughter relationships and processes of intergenerational transmission from the Republican period to contemporary China?

Submission Guidelines

Proposals should include an abstract of the presentation (300–400 words, in French or English), a short indicative bibliography, and a brief biographical note on the author. Please also indicate whether you would like to request financial support: **no support; travel; accommodation; travel and accommodation.**

Proposals should be submitted as a single PDF document to the following email addresses: renyou.hou@cnrs.fr; yang.lei@inalco.fr; shiwei.LI@univ-amu.fr.

Deadline for submissions: 1 December 2026

Notification of the Scientific Committee's decision: late December 2026

The conference will take place from **26 to 28 April 2027 at Inalco, Paris.**

Publication and Financial Support

Following the conference, a collective publication is envisaged, either as an edited volume and/or a special issue of an academic journal. Please indicate in your proposal whether you would like to contribute to this publication.

Participants requesting financial support for travel and/or accommodation are expected to **participate in this publication project**. Where possible, a first draft of the paper will be requested before the conference, ideally during April 2027, in order to allow for thorough preparation of the panels and to facilitate the discussants' preparation.

Financial support will be provided subject to the available budget and may cover all or part of the costs of travel and/or accommodation.

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