Jesuits and Matriarchs

Amsler, Nadine

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INTRODUCTION

In 1682 the Flemish Jesuit Philippe Couplet returned from a twenty-two-year stay in China. He arrived in Holland with heavy luggage. Among his many objects were several gifts donated by Candida Xu (1607–1680), an eminent Catholic lady of Songjiang (today part of Shanghai city). The gifts included textiles, such as Mass vestments and altar cloths embroidered by Candida and her daughters; richly ornamented altar vessels made from precious material; and “four hundred volumes in Chinese written by the Jesuit missionaries, the purchase of which was financed by Candida Xu.” These gifts were destined for the pope and well-known European churches. Couplet’s luggage likely also contained a first draft of a book on the pious life of the China mission’s female patron: *The Story of a Christian Lady of China, Candida Xu* (Historia Nobilis Feminae Candida Hiu, Christianae Sinensis).

*The Story of a Christian Lady of China* was first published in French in 1688 as one of a series of publications instigated by Couplet. Along with the famous *Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher* (Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, 1687) it justified the Jesuits’ China mission to a European audience that was by then increasingly unsettled by an emerging dispute between Jesuits and mendicants commonly known as the “rites controversy.” It sought to encourage rich European Catholics, especially pious ladies, to emulate Candida Xu in her virtuousness, piety, and generous charity toward the China mission. Like other pieces of early modern European travel writing, it was also intended to provide European readers with what might be called proto-ethnographic information on China. Indeed, *The Story of a Christian Lady of China* would go on to decisively shape historians’ knowledge of women in seventeenth-century Chinese Catholicism.

However, *The Story of a Christian Lady of China* raises questions as to whether Couplet’s book is indeed a suitable source for historians interested in the role of women in seventeenth-century Chinese Catholicism. In its descriptions of Chinese women it deploys a rhetoric of distance throughout.
“I will say nothing,” Couplet wrote at the outset, “about [Candida’s] childhood, nor of the fourteen years of her marriage, for Chinese girls and women have so little contact with the world that you see them very rarely.” According to Couplet, Chinese women lived “shut away in apartments which are so withdrawn that there is no greater solitude than the one in which they spend the most part of their life.” Although Candida had more freedom after she was widowed, Couplet repeatedly insisted that Europeans could hardly imagine the delicacy of the Jesuits’ dealings with Chinese women, due to the latter’s reclusiveness and modesty.

Was this a prudish Jesuit’s attempt to dispel any thought of intimacy between the spiritual father and his female adept? Or was it rather a reflection of the life circumstances of Chinese women like Candida Xu, who was a member of the scholar gentry? If Chinese Catholic women did indeed live as self-contained a life as Couplet suggests, how did missionaries cater to their religious needs? How did Catholic women organize their religious piety, and how did they perceive the “teachings of the Lord of Heaven” (Tianzhujiao) propagated by the Jesuits? These questions are illuminated by analysis of the significance of gendered spatial relations in the Jesuits’ mission to seventeenth-century China.

If, up to now, only little has been written about women’s role in the Jesuits’ mission to China, this is because research on Chinese Catholicism has largely neglected the household as a religious space. The domestic sphere was where, during the seventeenth century, Chinese Catholic women predominantly practiced their religion. Both Jesuit missionaries and Chinese women contributed to this development: while the Jesuits helped to increase the importance of the household as religious space by defining house oratories as women’s primary spaces of worship, women used the freedom that the domestic sphere granted them and created their own networks and forms of religious sociability.

The household was the ritual space that Chinese society traditionally assigned to women, who were responsible for domestic ancestor worship, the worship of household deities, the organization of domestically celebrated life-cycle rituals, and domestic seasonal rituals. This gendered division of ritual labor left its traces in Catholic women’s religious practices in several ways, furthering women’s preference for certain forms of individual piety, shaping Catholic women’s ritual communities, and contributing to the emergence of a specific domestic religious culture among women of Catholic gentry families.
THE JESUIT MISSION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

When Candida Xu was born, in the first decade of the seventeenth century, commerce, consumption, and the arts were thriving in unprecedented ways in China. The late Ming (ca. 1580–1644) was a period of increased monetization, urbanization, and demographic growth, and it saw a rapid expansion of the printing business. A new, urban culture of consumption was created, and moral and social standards that had been viewed, until then, as timeless started to change. The increased cultural flexibility of the era also extended to Chinese people’s piety. People had a strong penchant for syncretism, and new developments within Confucian thinking placed special emphasis on the individual. Some of these developments came to a halt with the fall of the Ming and the establishment of the Qing dynasty by the Manchus in 1644, with the second half of the century experienced by most members of the former Ming elite as a period of deep crisis. Nevertheless, a distinctive Qing culture was only starting to be formed during the first decades after the conquest, so that many of the Ming cultural developments still reverberated until 1700.

The novel developments in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese society also affected women’s lives. Courtesan culture flourished in late Ming cities, and the market in women, on which poor country girls as well as wives changed hands as maidservants or concubines, thrived. Simultaneously, however, growing numbers of Chinese women strove for Confucian feminine ideals. The cult of female chastity made widows commit suicide as a sign of marital fidelity and prompted young girls to keep lifelong fidelity to late fiancés they had hardly ever known. Furthermore, the ideal of female seclusion—derived from the famous sentence in The Book of Rites (Liji), “Men and women shall be separated” (Nan nü you bie)—led literati families to accommodate their female members in remote “inner quarters” (guige) and caused scholar officials to promulgate new regulations aimed at limiting the occasions on which the sexes mingled in public. While these developments significantly restricted women’s sphere of action, trends in the opposite direction were also under way. Ming elite women took advantage of the opportunities granted by the new communicative means of the era. In a cultural environment that celebrated female talent and promoted the ideal of companionate marriage, an increasing number of literate elite women read novels, exchanged letters, and wrote and published poetry. Thus, although Chinese women—and especially
elite women—were conspicuously invisible in seventeenth-century China, they simultaneously participated in the semipublic realm of the arts in an unprecedented way.

Of all this, Europeans knew little or nothing at the turn of the seventeenth century. The Ming emperors, who had organized expeditions to South Asia during the fifteenth century, had lost their interest in maritime relations in the sixteenth century. Chinese merchants continued to be important players in the Asian maritime trade. Imperial officials, however, were intent on keeping China uncorrupted by the noxious influence of barbarian lands. When the first Portuguese merchant ships reached South China in the early sixteenth century, Europeans realized that the Chinese were anything but enthusiastic about their arrival. Instead of establishing close trade relations with them, they only allowed the foreigners to stay on a small, rocky peninsula some eighty kilometers south of Canton, imposing strict regulations upon the modalities of trade. From this place—soon known by the name “Macao” in Portuguese sources—missionaries, who had reached this southern corner of China on Portuguese ships, tried to enter China from the second half of the sixteenth century onward. However, they were remarkably unsuccessful in their endeavor. Although some of them were allowed to accompany trade delegations to Canton, no one was allowed to stay in inland China for long. The dream of China’s evangelization only started to materialize toward the end of the sixteenth century, when a new ecclesiastical actor entered the stage: the Society of Jesus.

Founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534, the Society of Jesus had, from its very beginnings, developed a vivid interest in overseas missions. Already Francis Xavier, one of Ignatius’s first companions, had worked as a missionary in India and Japan; he died on a small island off the Chinese coast in 1552. More Jesuit missionaries reached Asia toward the end of the sixteenth century, when the new ecclesiastical order grew in numbers and was fast becoming a principal tool for the implementation of the Catholic Church’s reform plans decided upon during the Council of Trent (1545–63). The numbers of conversions were on the rise, particularly in Japan, where the Jesuits had experimented with cultural accommodation, learning Japanese and adapting their outer appearance to Buddhist monks. Inspired by the Japanese model, the Jesuits decided to try to enter China armed with their signature accommodation strategy. In 1579 the Jesuit visitor to East Asia Alessandro Valignano ordered Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), an Italian missionary stationed in Goa, to come to
Macao in order to learn Chinese. Four years later, Ruggieri, together with his younger confrere Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), moved to Zhaoqing. There the two men, dressed in Buddhist monks’ garbs, established the first Jesuit residence in China.25

During a period that might be called a long seventeenth century (ca. 1580–1690), the China mission was almost exclusively in the hands of the Jesuits, who in turn were subjected to the Portuguese Padroado, a patronate over all African and Asian missions granted to the Portuguese crown by the pope.26 Some mendicant friars reached Southwest China from the 1630s onward, and vicars apostolic to China were appointed in the 1680s by the Holy Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide). However, neither of them posed a serious challenge to the Jesuit monopoly over the evangelization of the Middle Kingdom.27 From the missionaries’ viewpoint, this situation entailed a significant degree of independence from Roman authorities. Despite continued conflicts triggered by the Chinese rites controversy from the 1640s onward, these authorities did not have the institutional means to maintain a firm grip on the distant China mission.28

This period was, furthermore, an era when the Chinese authorities were relatively tolerant toward Catholicism. Anti-Catholic incidents did occasionally occur. They included the Nanjing incident (1616–17), during which the vice-minister of the Nanjing Ministry of Rites placed the missionaries and several Chinese Catholics under arrest, and the “Calendar Case” (1664–69), when Johann Adam Schall von Bell was accused of having selected inauspicious dates and places in his function as imperial astronomer, resulting in the exile of the Jesuits in Canton.29 However, these movements should not detract from the fact that the seventeenth century was a period of considerable growth of Chinese Catholicism, the numbers of converts rising from a few thousands in the 1610s to some tens of thousands in the 1630s and reaching their zenith with approximately two hundred thousand at the end of the seventeenth century.30

GENDER RELATIONS IN CHINESE CATHOLICISM

Interest in Chinese Catholicism as a phenomenon of Sino-Western cultural exchange was sparked by French sinologist Jacques Gernet’s 1982 book Chine et christianisme—a study that rated the Jesuits’ mission to China as a failure due to the cultural misunderstanding between the European missionaries and the Chinese. As a response to Gernet, historians have started
to unearth evidence of Chinese people’s active role in entrenching Catholicism in China. They have shown that the Jesuits relied heavily on Chinese helpers in their evangelical work and that lay institutions were a key element of Chinese Catholic religious life. Drawing on the extensive Chinese documentary records, they have also shown how the Chinese converts’ own views on the “teachings of the Lord of Heaven” are visible in their writings. In light of this, several scholars have become interested in Chinese Catholicism as a phenomenon that sprang from intense intercultural interaction between (predominantly European) missionaries and various Chinese actors. Despite this increased attention to Chinese Catholics, however, not much is known about Chinese women who, during the seventeenth century, came into contact with the Jesuits and decided to convert to Catholicism. This contrasts starkly with research on (primarily eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) missions of the Dominicans in Fujian and missions of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Sichuan and Manchuria, where historians have pointed to the important role of Chinese women.

While the gender perspective was, until now, largely absent from studies on the seventeenth-century Jesuit China mission, historiography on contemporary European Catholicism offers a different picture. Research has shown that the changes triggered by the Tridentine reforms, which were the Catholic response to the Reformation and led to intensified efforts to catechize and control Catholic territories, provided women with new opportunities for piety, but they also restricted religious women’s lives by cloistering them in convents. Historians have, furthermore, turned their attention to the Catholic clergy’s gendered identity and, in particular, to the Jesuits’ attitudes toward women. Studies have shown how the Society of Jesus offered Catholic men an attractive masculine ideal to embrace. They have also shown that the Society’s refusal to become entangled with women’s religious institutions did not prevent Jesuits from maintaining close contact with (especially) upper-class spiritual daughters, whose spiritual lives were strongly influenced by the interiorized religiosity propagated by the Society of Jesus.

In the same vein, the life circumstances of women in seventeenth-century China are also remarkably well documented. Historians have analyzed how the Confucian norm of gender segregation affected the lives of women of different social strata and have singled out the seventeenth century as a period when women’s sphere of influence expanded in gentry families—in spite of the great value attached to female seclusion. Special
attention has also been paid to women’s involvement with religion. Scholars have pointed out that Chinese religiosity was in many ways closely intertwined with the female sphere and that a focus on women’s subculture, rather than on Confucian orthodox discourse, can help to unearth valuable insights into late imperial Chinese religiosity.39

Since this study tries to connect the study of women in seventeenth-century China with research on gender relations in post-Tridentine Catholicism, it is important to highlight some basic similarities between Chinese and European understandings of gender during the early modern period. In both seventeenth-century China and Europe, gender was a much more fluid category than in modern societies. Rather than primarily conceived of as a matter of biological sex, gender roles were defined by, and closely interrelated with, family, social, and cosmic orders.40 That gender relations nevertheless became a contested issue in several of the missionaries’ fields of activity was not the result of incompatible notions of what constituted gender. It was due to the fact that, as in many societies, gender relations were essential to the stabilization of power relations and, simultaneously, helped to assess the foreignness and degree of civilization of cultural “others.”41

Three sets of questions concerning gender relations in the zone of cultural contact created by the Jesuits’ missionary activity in China are of concern here. First, how were European and Chinese protagonists’ perceptions of the “others’” notions of gender relations shaped by their own society’s normative statements on gender, and what was the scope of interpretation in different sources addressing the gender norms of these cultural “others”? Second, what were the implications of cultural encounters for people’s gendered identities? The case of seventeenth-century Chinese Catholicism is especially noteworthy for the study of how the Jesuits’ masculinity—understood as a prescriptive concept constructed in relation to different forms of masculinities and femininities—was shaped by cultural contact.42 And third, what was the impact of the Sino-Western cultural encounter on Chinese women’s agency? Female Catholic piety can be reconstructed through analysis of the Catholic religious practices of different groups of Chinese women.

**Sources, Geographical Focus, and Structure**

Chinese Catholicism is a unique field for the investigation of cultural contact due to its extensive source records. The European-language sources produced by the missionaries are complemented by texts published by the
missionaries in Chinese, including catechisms, prayer books, moral tracts, and biographies of saints. Furthermore, Catholicism was also discussed by (male) Chinese authors—both converts and opponents of Catholicism. Taken together, these sources allow for a multi-perspective reconstruction of Chinese Catholicism as a phenomenon created by mutual perception and interaction.  

Despite this variety of sources, the most extensive record on seventeenth-century Chinese Catholicism was left behind by Jesuit missionaries, and it is therefore necessary to put these writings and their authors into context. Most of the Jesuit missionaries had entered the Society of Jesus in Europe, where they had studied in the order’s colleges. When they undertook the long and hazardous journey to Asia, many of them left Europe for good. Due to the subjection of the China mission under the Portuguese Padroado, the majority of missionaries were Portuguese. Nevertheless, the China mission also saw a considerable number of missionaries of other nationalities—especially Italians, Belgians, and Germans—many of whom played crucial roles in its history. During their sojourn in China they stayed in contact with one another and with their brethren in Europe mainly through written correspondence, much of which has been preserved in European archives.

Many of the missionaries’ writings, on which this study draws, are the product of the China mission’s organizational effort and administrative work. Within the internal organization of the China mission, three functions had the character of nodes where information was gathered, organized, and forwarded. The Jesuits were subordinated, first, to a (vice-) provincial responsible for the East-Asian missions—and, after the creation of the vice-province of China in 1619, exclusively for the Middle Kingdom. He took care of the flow of information between China and the Roman headquarters, compiling especially the annual letters (litterae annuae) addressed to the father general. The mission was sporadically monitored, second, by visitors sent to China by the Roman superiors. These usually wrote extensive reports on their activities and experience in the mission field. Third, the missionaries sought to defend their own interests and clarify internal questions by occasionally sending procurators back to Rome, usually arming them with ample information on the mission in order to substantiate their claims. The mission was connected to the Society’s Roman headquarters through these nodes, producing a flow of travelogues, accounts, written correspondence, and annual letters directed toward Europe.
The sources that contain most information on Chinese women’s Catholic piety are, perhaps ironically, the annual letters—rather standardized reports sent by the missionaries to the Jesuit superiors in Rome on an annual basis. They were compiled by the provincial of each Jesuit province in order to record the most important events of the previous year, with information usually presented in a strictly geographical structure. Several regulations issued by the Society of Jesus guided the process, regulating the rhythm of writing, the letters’ style and content, their circulation, and their compilation.\footnote{50} Due to the annual letters’ edifying purpose, they mainly contain success stories of conversion and devotion or stories of divine punishment inflicted on “infidels” or undevout Christians. This has prompted historians to question the usefulness of these documents for reconstructing the non-European realities encountered by the missionaries.\footnote{51} Despite their edifying nature, however, the annual letters contain much information on how the Jesuits organized and perceived their missions. Furthermore, they often reveal \textit{ex negativo} how non-Catholic practices persisted or reemerged in Catholic communities. To read the edifying stories against the grain can therefore produce valuable insights into Chinese Catholic realities.

To use the available sources in the best way possible, this book includes material on many different Chinese Catholic communities administered by the Jesuits. These were distributed over the vast territory of the late Ming and early Qing empires, stretching from the northern capital of Beijing to the southern merchant hub of Canton, and from coastal Shanghai to western Chengdu (see map 1). It will, however, combine this broad analysis with a more focused study of one particular area, the Jiangnan (literally “South of the [Yangzi] River”) region (see map 2). This was not only the region with the densest Catholic presence but was also the most prosperous and culturally advanced region of seventeenth-century China.\footnote{52} Owing to this focus, the main sites of cultural contact that this study investigates are urban centers such as Nanjing, Shanghai, Songjiang, and Jiading. Cities were the Jesuits’ preferred places of residence and are thus far better documented in their records than rural Catholic communities, which were only occasionally visited by a priest during mission circuits.\footnote{54} Although material on rural communities is taken into account if available, the focus of the analysis is therefore on cities and, more specifically, on Chinese Catholic urban households. For, although missionaries moved rather freely within the urban space and made contact with a great number of people whom they invited to their residences, they never made such invitations
to women, and they expected female converts to practice Catholic devotion within the domestic realm—a social space that has hitherto been largely ignored by studies of Chinese Catholicism. There are several advantages to a focus on devotional practice within the domestic realm. It helps us understand the ways Catholicism inscribed itself into Chinese family systems and how Catholic households organized their devotion. It also turns our attention to Chinese women’s domestic religious cultures, showing them as practitioners of an alternative religiosity and, simultaneously, as active patrons of religious institutions.55

The following chapters analyze how the Jesuits adapted their masculinity to Chinese Confucian gender norms and how Chinese women connected with the Catholic religion spread by the missionaries.56 They will explore the ways in which the Jesuits’ accommodation affected their representations of Chinese women, their ministry to women, and Chinese Catholic marriages and how the incompatibility between priestly and Confucian ideals pushed them to find creative solutions in their daily performances. Furthermore, they will show how women made use of Catholic spiritual remedies, how they organized and practiced their Catholic piety, and how they tapped into the Catholic female role model of virginity. Last but not least, they will argue that—in spite of the Jesuits’ consideration for the separation of the sexes—Chinese Catholic women’s lives were connected with Chinese Catholicism as a whole in many ways.