Jesuits and Matriarchs

Amsler, Nadine

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IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA, THE SCHOLARLY ELITE’S VIEWS ON, and behavior toward, women were determined by a set of assumptions about gender propriety and space that became decisive for literati Jesuits’ approach toward the evangelization of Chinese women. Most importantly, the literati elite were greatly concerned about the maintenance of gender segregation, which required elite women to live a secluded lifestyle. Although the practice of female seclusion was a comparatively recent phenomenon, dating back only to the Song dynasty (960–1279), it was authorized by the most ancient texts from the Chinese classical age.¹ *The Book of Rites* (*Liji*) referred to the importance of the “separation of the sexes” (*nannü zhi bie*) and prescribed that “men and women should not sit on the same mat, touch one another, [or] draw water from the same well.”² According to the ideal promoted by this Confucian classic, gender segregation should be so strict that even men and women from the same family would only meet rarely in everyday life. This practice was meant to ensure the maintenance of gender propriety, female chastity, and, by extension, good order in society.

This separation between men and women was tightly connected to yet another dichotomy central to Chinese culture: the distinction between inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) spheres reserved, respectively, for women and men. The “inner/outer” binary code was reflected in Chinese residential architecture in a variety of ways. On the one hand, Han houses usually consisted of closed architectural structures centered on one or several courtyards. In European houses the interior was usually intricately connected with the social space of the street, but in Chinese houses the two were clearly demarcated.³ The domestic realm itself, on the other hand, did not form a homogeneous interior space, but was again structured by the “inner/outer” binary code. As the Neo-Confucian scholar Sima Guang (1019–1086) wrote: “In housing there should be a strict demarcation between the inner and outer parts, with a door separating them. The two parts should share

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neither a well, a washroom, nor a privy. The men are in charge of all affairs on the outside; the women manage the inside affairs. During the day, the men do not stay in their private rooms nor the women go beyond the inner door without good reason." In residences of the Chinese elite, rooms were arranged according to a complex system. Innumerable gradations existed between the outermost spaces, designated for hosting males, and the innermost space—the women’s boudoir.

The boudoir door (guimen) demarcated a physically tangible boundary that separated the female space from the male spaces in rich literati households. Recent historical research, however, has emphasized the fluidity of boundaries between inner and outer spheres throughout the Ming-Qing period. It understands inner and outer as relational terms and the line between the two spheres as a “negotiated boundary,” which constantly redefined both separate physical spaces and modes of interaction. People and objects regularly transgressed the threshold of the inner quarters. Maintaining distinctions between inner and outer did not, conversely, always entail a spatial separation, but could also involve bodily practices such as avoiding touch or restraining one’s gaze. The question of whether or not contact between women and men was morally sanctioned depended on various factors, such as the age, degree of kinship, and social status of the people involved. Young children under the age of seven sui (i.e., eight years) were not expected to respect the separation between the sexes as rigorously as their elder siblings were. Close relatives had more occasions to meet with one another compared to distant family members and people who were unrelated. Families of lower social status, furthermore, did not usually have the financial means to observe the separation of the sexes as strictly as upper-class families did. A humble social background did not, however, prevent people from sharing the elite’s ideal of separate spheres. Poor peasant families who lacked the means to maintain separate women’s apartments would nonetheless separate the living room from the kitchen using a curtain, thus providing women with a place to retire to when male guests were being received.

Since the gender segregation ideal was embraced by all layers of Chinese society, the respecting of “curtains and screens” (weibu)—or the boundaries between female and male spheres—played a vital role in shaping the self-representation of the Han, who claimed to distinguish themselves from their uncultivated, “barbarian” neighbors by dint of their cultivated, well-ordered gender relations. Late imperial Chinese ethnographers often emphasized the otherness of their non-Han neighbors by evoking the ancient Chinese
trope of a “kingdom of women” (nüren guo), a site of gender inversion and male sexual adventure. This imaginary place contrasted sharply with the Middle Kingdom, which the Chinese represented as a place where cloistered women cultivated the virtue of chastity in secluded apartments.\(^\text{10}\)

The literati’s valuation of gender segregation and female chastity as a key element of the Chinese social order was, however, paired with a constant fear of the overthrow of this social order by heterodox (xie) tendencies within society. Confucian thought thus attached yet another connotation to gender segregation, which was seen as signifying not only Chinese cultural refinement but also Confucian cultural orthodoxy and ritual orthopraxy (zheng).\(^\text{11}\) Many Confucian moralists were convinced that disorder began to reign whenever sexes mixed. Disregard for gender segregation was perceived as a threat to the politico-moral order and was thought to create chaos (luan).\(^\text{12}\) The ruling elite’s preoccupation with social order made them alert, therefore, to religious doctrines and social movements that promoted gender arrangements differing from the Confucian norm. The government begrudgingly tolerated Buddhist and Taoist doctrines that, although “based on other principles” (yiduan), were not perceived as a threat to China’s moral order. Nevertheless, the ruling elite constantly suspected the misuse of temples for the public mingling of the sexes, and they acted harshly against “heterodox” religious organizations accused of disregarding proper gender relations.\(^\text{13}\)

Popular Buddhist movements, in particular, aroused the suspicion of Confucian moralists.\(^\text{14}\) The Buddhist religious community’s (sangha) notions of family and society differed strongly from those promoted by the Chinese governing elite. The Buddhist monastics’ celibate lifestyle was incompatible with the Confucian valuation of marriage and the family, which denounced celibacy as a lack of filiality.\(^\text{15}\) Confucian moralists harbored the suspicion, furthermore, that Buddhist celibacy was a mere cover for extramarital erotic romance on the part of the monks, where unmarried men surrendered to suppressed passions, endangering Chinese women’s chastity. This suspicion was deepened by the Confucian moralists’ opinion that Buddhist monks did not duly respect gender segregation. Buddhist clerics often encouraged female lay devotees to leave their secluded apartments to visit their temples or go on pilgrimages. They also visited the women in their private quarters to expound the sutras to them and edify them with religious talks. These transgressions of Confucian gender boundaries were interpreted by literati as a sign of moral inferiority and thus contributed to the monks’ bad reputation.\(^\text{16}\)
The literati’s fear that women might be led astray by Buddhist monks was one reason why they went to great lengths to prevent women from engaging with pious activities in Buddhist temples. Women were perceived as being especially inclined toward popular Buddhist piety, not least because of the entertainment that temple visits and other communal pious activities could provide. Temple bans imposed by local magistrates were often intended to counter the promiscuous behavior of young women. The frequency with which the bans were issued in the late imperial era can be understood as an indication that officials saw Confucian values endangered by a new wave of lay Buddhist activity. Indeed, so omnipresent were Confucian fears about the degeneration of temples into sites of promiscuity that they were even present in legal texts such as The Great Ming Code (Da Ming lü), which imposed severe punishment for sexual promiscuity in temples.

It was precisely because gender segregation formed a core value of the literati elite, and because the Buddhist temple formed, in this elite’s view, a potentially dangerous antipode to the morally pure realm of women’s inner quarters, that the Jesuits’ change of social identity from Buddhist monks to Confucian literati strongly affected their opinions about interactions with women. Wearing the Buddhist monks’ garb, the Jesuits had had relatively unrestricted access to Chinese women. Their new literati identity, however, required them to largely refrain from direct contact, especially with gentry women.

Sources show that the Jesuits had a clear understanding of the effects that their change of attire entailed. Nicolas Trigault was the first to remark upon the new attitude toward women that the missionaries’ ascent to the ranks of literati had rendered necessary. In the Annual Letter of 1613, he explained that when the Jesuits still wore the dress of Buddhist monks it had been possible for them to interact with women. However, at that time, he wrote, “We were excluded from interacting and conversing with the important and noble men.” According to Trigault, this situation had proved disadvantageous for the Jesuits and thus needed to be revised: “When we chose our way to dress, it seemed more appropriate to us to be able to interact with men. We thought that, if we were allowed to interact with men, we would finally also be allowed to deal with women, which [now] actually becomes easier every day.” This view of Trigault’s—that it was more important to have access to the “important and noble men” of China than to its women—remained decisive for the Jesuits’ analysis of their situation in China throughout the seventeenth century. Looking back on the past
century of the mission, Trigault’s Flemish compatriot Philippe Couplet argued in the 1680s that difficulties in approaching women were a price the Jesuits had had to pay for being able to interact with the powerful. “The first missionaries,” he wrote, “wisely judged that it was more important for our Religion to interact with magistrates, literati and family heads than with people who are naturally disposed to piety.” In Couplet’s view, the social prestige associated with the literati made this trade-off worthwhile.

The transition from monk to literatus not only shaped interactions with women. It also gave rise to a distinctively Confucian representation of China’s “moral topography” in proto-ethnographic writing. These works constructed the Buddhist temple and the inner quarter as antipodes—diametrically opposed sites of female immorality and chastity that became constitutive of the Jesuits’ representation of Chinese women.

IMMORAL TEMPLES, LECHEROUS MONKS

Missionary representations of China’s moral topography, like Chinese literati arguments for Confucian orthodoxy, depicted Buddhist temples and their inhabitants—usually referred to by the Jesuits as “bonzes”—as a prime threat to women’s morality and chastity. According to Jesuit authors, temples were places where innocent, pious women were seduced by lewd clerics using their religious lifestyle as a pretext for illicit sexual relations.

This representation is astonishing in view of some striking similarities between the Catholic and Buddhist concepts of religious space. The two religious traditions both distinguished lay practitioners from clerics and established special places where the latter could dedicate their lives to pious activities. They both also developed different kinds of consecrated spaces, with Buddhist temples and Catholic churches usually dedicated exclusively to worship and the monasteries of both traditions permanently inhabited by monks and nuns. These apparent similarities between the Catholic and Buddhist social roles and spaces were matched by similarities in ritual and even doctrine, both religions aiming at man’s salvation.

In view of these similarities, it is hardly surprising that the Jesuits in China were first advised to adopt the Buddhist monks’ dress, a strategy that had also proved successful in the Jesuits’ mission to Japan. Michele Ruggieri was the first to dress like a Buddhist monk, when living in Zhaoqing from 1582 to 1588, and he never questioned the adequacy of his Buddhist persona. From 1584 onward, he lived in a church called the Temple of the
Holy Flower (Shenghua Si), a name actually identifying the church as a Buddhist temple (si).  

Other Jesuits, however, soon noted a major difference between the prestige of European Catholic churches and Chinese Buddhist temples. The elite of scholarly officials, according to Alessandro Valignano, did not hold Buddhist temples and monasteries in high esteem. They used them, indeed, in a most mundane fashion, something leading, in Valignano’s view, to their desecration:

The [mandarins] customarily see themselves as the masters of the houses and temples of the Chinese bonzes and priests. They use [these buildings] at their will for their recreation. They go there to eat, and they hold their banquets and invitations there. . . . Not only do the bonzes and fathers of these temples not have any means to prevent them from doing so, but they also have to keep everything ready in order to receive them. And all this happens although, as I have pointed out, the mandarins do not maintain any friendly relations with [the Buddhist monks]. In everything they have to serve them as though they were their servants, and our house in Zhaoqing was also subjected to this hassle.

Although Valignano overstated the general uninterest and even hostility of Chinese scholar-officials toward Buddhism, his analysis of their relationship to Buddhist temples and monasteries highlighted something very relevant for the Jesuits: officials’ propensity to visit Buddhist sites for recreation and amusement. On such occasions they expected to be entertained by the monks as their guests. Although Buddhist temples were not part of the public (gong) realm in a strict sense, they were social spaces open to the gentry for public sociability. Matteo Ricci complained about this tiresome Chinese custom, writing to his superiors about how the Jesuits’ temple in Zhaoqing was “very much frequented and disturbed by the Mandarins.” This quotidian atmosphere of Buddhist monasteries was reinforced by how, unlike post-Tridentine monasteries, they were not equipped with cloisters, places where Buddhist monks and nuns could have shielded themselves from the worries that beset secular life. The Chinese literati’s lack of esteem for Buddhist monks, so different from the clerics’ prestige that the Jesuits had encountered in Japan, proved decisive for the missionaries’ change of attitude toward Buddhism. Their writings started to adopt the position that “the laws of [the Buddhas] Shakyamuni and Amithaba are only good for deceiving and entertaining vulgar and ignorant people.”
They did not acknowledge the existence of the Tripitaka, the vast and sophisticated corpus of Buddhist texts, and appeared interested in Buddhist doctrine “only in proportion to the degree of antagonism they perceived” in it.\textsuperscript{34} From Matteo Ricci onward, they repeatedly referred to Buddhist monks’ humble social origins and lack of education.\textsuperscript{35} They criticized them, furthermore, for the lack of seclusion in their monasteries. In the eyes of the Jesuits, who had witnessed the efforts of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church to enforce the cloistering of women’s convents in Europe, the insouciance with which Buddhist nuns wandered about the streets in China was unmistakable proof of the Buddhist community’s moral weakness.\textsuperscript{36}

The Buddhist clerics’ moral weakness was, according to Jesuit authors, especially evident when it came to their disregard for gender proprieties. Their writings repeatedly accused Buddhist monks of sexual immodesty and of making idolatrous women lapse into vice after associating with monks. These accusations were sometimes formulated in highly general terms, referring to how “although [the bonzes] do not have wives, there are those who do not even keep chastity” and insinuating that the bonzes “know how to associate with the young widows when making their devils during the funeral of husbands, and on various other occasions.”\textsuperscript{37} Other authors referred to specific events that missionaries had heard of. Adrien Greslon, for instance, recounted how a soldier had discovered a group of bonzes amusing themselves with a woman in a Guangzhou temple, a crime that the bonzes subsequently, and unsuccessfully, tried to hide by murdering the person who had discovered them.\textsuperscript{38} Originating with the Jesuits, this trope of the lecherous Buddhist monk became, over the course of the seventeenth century, relatively widespread in European proto-ethnographic writing about China. It also emerged in Protestant publications, such as Jürgen Andersen and Volquard Jversen’s “Oriental Travelogue” (Orientalische Reise-Beschreibung, 1669), which was published by the German diplomat and scholar Adam Olearius and included a picture of the “Cloth Sack” (Budai) Buddha, labeled as the Chinese “God of Voluptuousness” (Deus Voluptatis; figure 2.1).

It is, of course, impossible to determine the extent to which every Jesuit accusation against Buddhist monks corresponded to historical fact. What is clear, however, is that Jesuit claims about the sexual immodesty of late Ming Buddhist monks did not match those monks’ self-perceptions. Specialists in Ming Buddhism, it is true, have observed that the discipline (\textit{vinaya}) of the late Ming Buddhist community was
relatively lax. Indeed, contemporary Buddhist masters such as the famous Chan master Zhuhong (1535–1615) of the Yunqi monastery criticized their fellow monks for their worldliness and for their “pursuit of non-Buddhist interests and avocations, their greed for donations, and their love of material comforts.” Sexual transgression, however, was not a centerpiece of late Ming Buddhism’s internal critique. Late Ming Buddhist monks’ lack of attention to vinaya might well have provided a fertile ground for sexual transgression. The most important masters of reform in late Ming Buddhism did not, however, judge it a problem that needed to be addressed. The legal record for the period largely confirms this picture, for actual legal cases of promiscuity in temples are relatively few. This suggests that Jesuit accusations against Buddhist monks were likely based on unconfirmed rumor, not eyewitness testimony.
This reading of the missionaries’ accusations against Buddhist monks is supported by the remarkably widespread deployment, in writings inspired by Confucian morality, of the topos of Buddhist monks’ promiscuity. It was present in a wide variety of places, including “official reports, didactic materials, biographical writings, and literary sources.” Famous vernacular novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jepingmei, 1618) and *The Water Margin* (Shuihuzhuan; fourteenth century) reminded their readers that “in this world Buddhist monks of such high virtue and attainments that they can remain impervious to the temptations of the flesh are few” and ridiculed them as “sex-starved hungry ghosts.” In the 1620s, the collection of anecdotes *Monks and Nuns in the Sea of Sin* (Sengni niehai) was dedicated to the topic of promiscuous monks. This conspicuous presence of the trope of promiscuous monks in seventeenth-century fiction can be understood as the result of the conflict between the Buddhist monastic lifestyle and Confucian morality discussed in the first part of this chapter.

By representing the Buddhist temple as a site of immorality, where Chinese women were in danger of losing their chastity, the missionaries adopted part of the literati’s mental map. They saw writing about the sexual impropriety of Chinese Buddhist monks as a means of adopting Confucian discourse, which, as literati Jesuits, they now regarded as authoritative for themselves. By speaking about the threats Buddhist monks posed to women’s modesty, they signaled their adherence to the Confucian elite. It also complemented their hostile attitude toward “vicious” and “idolatrous” Buddhist clerics, with whom the missionaries were often in direct competition as providers of religious services. Although a Confucian trope, the representation of the “immoral idolater” was also easily understood by European readerships. Idolatry and immorality were often represented as closely connected in early modern Catholic missionary discourse. The depictions found in Jesuit accounts of the immoral idolatrous priest and the sexually active idolatrous woman could therefore be easily integrated into an early modern European Catholic worldview.

In the Jesuit writings, however, the idolatrous temple as a site of sexual indecorum represented only one aspect of China’s moral topography. The morally pure realm of women’s inner quarters figured as the temple’s antipode. These were an exclusively female space—a site usually beyond the missionaries’ reach in everyday life thanks to their acceptance of the Confucian ideal of gender segregation.
The Jesuits’ proto-ethnographic writings provide rich testimony of the missionaries’ interest in Chinese women’s seclusion and its consequences for female virtuousness and chastity. Seventeenth-century Europeans were, of course, familiar with the idea that women’s proper place was in the home, an idea repeated in European prescriptive literature throughout the early modern period. The construction of domesticity as women’s only legitimate sphere of influence had not yet, however, become the dominant gender ideology that it would be in eighteenth- and (especially) nineteenth-century Europe. The Chinese preoccupation with gender segregation was, therefore, perceived by the missionaries as a noteworthy phenomenon. The missionaries wrote detailed accounts of the delicately differentiated social space in Chinese residential houses and the close attention paid to the taboos associated with female quarters. Alvaro Semedo thus explained to his readership: “[Chinese literati families] have rooms especially designed for receiving guests. The first is indifferently accessible to everyone. You can enter it and sit down without asking anyone, even if there is no doorkeeper for guiding you inside. There is another, more interior room that they call the ‘secret room’ [yinshi] for [receiving] relatives and close friends. [Guests] stop there without going any further, because adjacent [to this room] are the gui, or women’s quarters, where even domestics do not dare enter, except if they are very young.”

In the same vein, Giulio Aleni—who had been able to sightsee at the Catholic official Ma Chengxiu’s residential palace when accompanying Ma to Shangzhou, where he had been appointed as an official—provided a lengthy account of the innumerable courtyards and gates that separated women’s apartments from the outer world. Aleni described the gentry women’s quarters as calm and serene, far from the disturbances of public life: “[In the women’s quarters, there] are a variety of rooms, cabinets, studios, halls, gardens, fishponds and other things of great commodity and recreation, which are very helpful for passing the time in this great solitude, and for entertaining happily those who live there.”

While Aleni depicted Chinese gentry women’s boudoirs as blissfully tranquil, not all missionaries shared such views of female seclusion. Philippe Couplet imagined women’s life in the inner chambers as a sort of “imprisonment.” In Alvaro Semedo’s opinion, moreover, the inconvenience of seclusion was only softened by the fact that it had become a habit for those subjected to it. However, although divided over whether Chinese
women found the secluded lifestyle agreeable or displeasing. Jesuits commonly agreed that seclusion was commendable for augmenting women’s modesty and families’ peace and good fortune. Only a few authors, including the German polyglot Athanasius Kircher (who had never been to China himself), disapproved, seeing it as an expression of excessive male jealousy. Female seclusion, in the eyes of most Jesuits, was the main reason for Chinese women’s admirable chastity, a quality that, according to the Portuguese Jesuit Gabriel de Magalhães, they cultivated so thoroughly it appeared to be innate.

Some Jesuit representations of the inner quarters conspicuously resembled those of the boudoir by Chinese literati. The latter's poems typically referred to women's quarters as a place of longing, where men could retreat from the everyday troubles of the world. Alvaro Semedo drew on this literary theme in his suggestive description of the inner quarters as a space “venerated [by the Chinese] like a sacred place”: “If someone wants to enter them without thinking, a word suffices for arresting him immediately.” Semedo also described the inner chambers as a place of refuge for husbands, where even their fathers could not follow them: “If a father wants to chastise his son (for the fathers never give up their authority over their children and retain their power to chastise them even if they are married), the son only has to quickly get as far as the apartment of his wife; this is a haven of refuge, where the father does not dare enter.”

Rather than representing the women’s quarters from the perspective of their female inhabitants—describing them as sites of women’s work and of busy everyday life—Semedo adopted the male literati’s perspective, perceiving it as a “Gegenwelt” to the lives of men outside their homes. The two boudoir pictures printed in Athanasius Kircher’s China Illustrated (China Illustrata, 1667) also draw on this imagery (figure 2.2). These pictures, modeled on Chinese images that Kircher had received from his confreres from the China mission, offer a close-up view of the realm of the inner quarters. They show two elegantly adorned palace women standing in beautifully furnished rooms decorated with two Chinese characters, together forming the word yaotiao, an idiomatic expression used by men to praise female modesty, reclusiveness, and attractiveness.

Whereas some missionaries adopted the Chinese literati’s perspective, describing the women’s boudoir as a site of moral purity and tranquility, others discussed it from the vantage point of proto-ethnographic observers, contrasting China’s customs with the customs back home in Europe. From this perspective, the Jesuits were usually full of praise for
Chinese women’s modesty, a quality that, in their view, was especially manifest in women’s bodily attire. Like the walls and doors around the inner quarters, Chinese women’s dress shielded the female body from prying eyes, covering women “from their heads to their feet, so that one cannot even see their fingertips.” It was obvious for many clerical observers that this modest attire, which left only the women’s faces visible, was superior to that of European women. “If only certain European women followed them in this!” exclaimed Athanasius Kircher in his China Illustrated. “Certainly this would lead many of them to a more modest behavior.”

Another feature of Chinese women’s bodily appearance, in addition to their dress, was perceived by the missionaries as an integral part of women’s chaste and retired lifestyle—their bound feet. Although the
Jesuits knew that tiny feet were regarded by the Chinese as a feature of female beauty, they commonly interpreted footbinding as a result of Chinese men’s efforts to enforce women’s seclusion. The missionaries observed that women’s tiny feet made walking painful and their gait unsteady. This lent plausibility to Matteo Ricci’s hypothesis that the custom of tightly bandaging girls’ feet to prevent them from growing was “the invention of a wise man, serving the goal not to let [the women] walk the streets and making them stay at home, as is most appropriate for women.” Not all missionaries approved of it as unequivocally as Matteo Ricci. Some of them even roundly rejected it as a “folly” (folie) or “stupidity” (stultitia), which deformed women’s natural and God-given body shape and was thus an abject custom unworthy of so cultivated a nation as the Chinese. Despite these critical voices, however, the Jesuits generally accepted that footbinding had the positive effect of confining women to domesticity.

The imperial cult of female chastity, and especially widow chastity—promoted by both late Ming and early Qing emperors—fitted well with Jesuit perceptions of Chinese women’s reclusiveness and modesty. Alvaro Semedo praised the “commendable custom” (loüable coutume) of building triumphal arches for young widows who practiced chastity for the remainder of their lives. Gabriel de Magalhães also approvingly mentioned how a conspicuous number of such exemplary women were “celebrated in books and poems, and honored by the Chinese with titles, inscriptions, temples, and triumphal arches.” However, while the Jesuits approved of the Chinese veneration of female chastity, and especially widow chastity, they were alienated by the practice of female suicide that many people in seventeenth-century China saw as a legitimate act of marital fidelity and chastity. The fact that “especially Chinese women kill themselves for the slightest reason,” as noted by the Portuguese Jesuit André Ferram in 1656, was incompatible with the Christian condemnation of suicide and thus was not accepted as an expression of female chastity.

The above analysis of the Jesuits’ representations of the inner quarters and of female modesty points toward a remarkable uniformity in their representations of Chinese women, whom they consistently depicted as chaste, secluded beings. It seems, indeed, that the Jesuits’ close association with the Chinese scholar-gentry made them narrow the focus of their proto-ethnographic descriptions to women from literati families. The missionaries’ writings acknowledged that female seclusion, at least as described in their accounts, was generally an elite phenomenon and was not implemented so strictly by every social and ethnic group in the diverse population.
of the empire. No Jesuit, however, ever ventured into a detailed description of the life circumstances of any group of Chinese women other than those of the gentry elite. Jesuit authors only made, moreover, short references to female spheres that were not inner chambers. The existence of a market in women, in which poor girls were sold to wealthy households as concubines or maidservants, was mentioned in passing by a few authors. However, almost no mention was made of late Ming China’s rich courtesan culture. The Jesuits also failed to acknowledge the different lifestyles of Manchu women, who, especially in the early years after the conquest, did not practice seclusion in the strict manner of Chinese gentry women.

Some Jesuit authors even went so far as to deny altogether that some lifestyles did not include the seclusion practiced by Chinese elite women. In an account published in 1607, for instance, Diego Pantoja explained that the missionaries could learn nothing about Chinese women’s lives, character, or customs, “for women stay within the home all their life and only go

FIG. 2.3. Two lower-class Chinese women, one bearing a child on her back and the other carrying water with a yoke. Ink drawing in Adriano de las Cortes’s manuscript “Relation of His Voyage, Shipwreck, and Captivity” (Relación del viage, naufragio y captiverio). Made by an unknown artist in Manila, 1626–29. © The British Library Board (Sloane 1005, fol. 154v).
outside for visiting their mother, sisters, or close relatives—and even this they do very rarely.” This image of universally secluded Chinese women was perpetuated by the Jesuits’ writings throughout the seventeenth century. Philippe Couplet was still taking the same line when writing about Candida Xu in the 1680s, explaining that he knew very little about the early life of his female patron, for “Chinese girls and women have so little contact with the outer world that you see them very rarely.”

There is one Jesuit account where the tenor differs sharply from that commonly found in the Jesuits’ proto-ethnographic writings. This is the unpublished account written by the Aragonese Jesuit Adriano de las Cortes (1578–1629). Las Cortes’s prolonged stay in China was the result of a mishap. He traveled the kingdom’s southern coast for several months after a shipwreck in 1625. An astute observer, Las Cortes filled his account with details of South China’s bustling social life, vividly conveyed. He described crowds of Chinese women assembling in public temples to pay homage to their deities. He wrote about women who worked outside their homes, rowed boats, and tended to domestic animals (figure 2.3). In passing, he also expressed his surprise about seeing so many women in public. Before coming to China, he had heard from his confreres that women were very retired and discreet—a picture that did not match the social reality he encountered in southern coastal China. Interestingly, Las Cortes’s description of China did not meet with his superiors’ approval. Its publication never saw the light of day.

Did Las Cortes’s relation remain unpublished because its author had failed to inscribe his work in the tradition established by the Jesuits—that of idealized, homogeneous representations of a thoroughly “Confucianized” China? What can be asserted with certainty is that the Jesuits’ descriptions of female seclusion took on a remarkably uniform quality, focusing exclusively on the Confucian ideal, rather than taking into account the broad variety of lifestyles simultaneously present in every society. By drastically reducing the complexity of the experienced social world, the Jesuits’ written accounts shaped strongly idealized representations of China and sustained their reading of China as an ancient civilization worthy of respect on account of its people’s natural wisdom and virtue. The missionaries also, simultaneously, paved the way for their defense, against European critics, of some of their accommodatory practices, notably those regarding the administration of sacraments to women, which I address in the next chapter.