4. Strengthening the Marital Bond: The Christianization of Chinese Marriage

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In his diary, Matteo Ricci remembered a “nice invention” by Luca, a rich Catholic servant working in the household of Ricci’s scholar-official friend Li Zhizao. Luca “said that he wanted to leave to his descendants a sign of Christianity, which he and his parents had started to follow.”¹ He had a large commemorative picture made portraying all members of his descent group. It was fashioned in the manner of the multigenerational ancestor portraits that Chinese families displayed during ancestor worship at home on New Year’s Day and other special occasions, a very popular genre. The portrait commissioned by Luca seems to have fulfilled all the conventions of this pictorial tradition, with one important difference. While a shared ancestor usually occupied a seat of honor in the center of traditional ancestor portraits, Luca assigned this place to Jesus. True-to-nature portraits of his relatives, placed around Jesus, were depicted with coronae—a sort of rosary—in their hands and small crucifixes and reliquaries around their necks.² Luca thus underlined the Catholic identity of his family. The picture, Ricci explained, led those relatives not yet converted to become Christians, for “if they had not, they could not have been painted.”³ It is likely that Luca intended to use the picture during domestic ancestor worship, when the descent group “receive[d] offerings and the kowtows of the family members.”⁴ That explains why his relatives were eager to be included in the painting. Not figuring in it would have been tantamount to exclusion from the lineage, a dreadful fate for anyone imbued with Confucian family values.

Luca’s enhancing of this picture with Catholic elements provides remarkable testimony of one family’s Catholic identity. Yet it simultaneously illustrates the persistence of Confucian views of the family within Chinese Catholic communities. Such views attached enormous value to the perpetuation of the patriline. They regarded relationships among members...
of the same patriline as the strongest bonds among family members and venerated agnatic antecedents in an almost religious manner.\textsuperscript{5}

Confucian concern for the patriline also influenced the meanings attributed to marriage. As stated by *The Book of Rites*, marriage served primarily to strengthen the patriline: “Looking toward the past, [marriages] provide for service to the ancestral temple; looking toward the future, they provide for the continuation of descendants.”\textsuperscript{6} According to Confucian thinking, wives were part of their husbands’ patriline from the moment they entered the household during wedding festivities. After their wedding, they owed filial behavior (*xiao*) to their parents-in-law, not their own parents. They were obliged to participate in the ancestral rituals of their husbands’ families, and they were expected to accept that their husbands took concubines in order to ensure the continuity of the patriline. Although a wife’s status was privileged in comparison with the markedly inferior social status of concubines, her legal status was insecure nevertheless. Confucian scriptures listed seven conditions (*qichu*) under which a husband was allowed to divorce his wife, while a wife was never allowed to divorce her husband.\textsuperscript{7}

European Catholics were of course familiar with the fourth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” and European social norms held the patriline in high esteem.\textsuperscript{8} Agnatic progenitors did not, however, play particularly important roles in European Catholic doctrinal writing about marriage.\textsuperscript{9} The Council of Trent stressed the sacred nature of the marital bond between man and woman and the importance of conjugal consensus as a primary prerequisite for valid matrimony, emphasizing the horizontal relationship between the spouses. Although the Council stated that spouses were joined for the sake of raising children, that was not the only goal of marriage, the other being the spouses’ mutual aid and support.\textsuperscript{10} Since the Middle Ages Christian doctrine had conceptualized marriage as a monogamous, indissoluble bond, sanctified and sanctioned by God. The Tridentine reformers tried to impose this view more effectively on all Catholics by making the sacrament of matrimony obligatory and a prerequisite for legal marriage.\textsuperscript{11}

The differences between Chinese and Catholic notions of marriage were noticed by the Jesuits, who offered detailed analyses of these divergences in their writings. They noted how the Chinese married at a very young age and how “everything is settled between the parents, without asking the consent of the children.”\textsuperscript{12} They also observed how wives were regarded as members of their husbands’ patriline. According to Gabriel de Magalhães,
this was expressed by the Chinese characters related to marriage: “The character *qu* [娶], which means that a man gets married or takes a wife, is composed of the characters *qu* [取], ‘to fetch,’ and *nü* [女], ‘woman.’ The character *jia* [嫁], which signifies that a woman gets married, is composed of the characters *jia* [家], ‘house,’ and *nü* [女], ‘woman.’ This means that the woman is in her house or family [after being married], for the Chinese hold that women belong to the house of their husbands, not to that of their parents.”

The Jesuits did not have any objections to the idea of a wife being integrated into the lineage of her husband upon her marriage. Some consequences of the Confucian valuation of the patriline were, however, incompatible with the Catholic view of marriage and thus posed problems for the missionaries. As in other extra-European Catholic missions, the Jesuits had to tackle practices such as polygyny and divorce—practices that, while widespread among Asian and Native American peoples, were in contradiction to the very core of Catholic marriage. The Jesuits had to find ways of resolving these contradictions, either by persuading the Roman authorities to grant them dispensations or by persuading their prospective Chinese converts to change their habits and marriage customs.

The Jesuits were uninterested in radically changing Confucian views of the family, but they saw a need to regulate (especially male) sexuality to make it compatible with post-Tridentine Catholic marriage norms. Their tolerant attitude toward Chinese customs is obvious in view of Chinese Catholic wedding ceremonies, which had an exclusively domestic and thus largely non-Catholic character. The ways in which the Jesuits tried to alter Chinese marriage become tangible by dint of a close reading of *The Government of the Family in the West* (Qijia xixue), a household manual published by Alfonso Vagnone in the late 1620s. It shows that there were primarily two aspects of Chinese marriage that needed to be adapted to Catholic doctrine: namely, divorce and polygyny.

**CHINESE, BUT NOT PAGAN: JESUIT VIEWS ON WEDDING CELEBRATIONS**

Like the sacraments of extreme unction and baptism, the sacrament of matrimony confronted the Jesuits with a problem. Its performance required the priest to have close contact with women, thus endangering the missionaries’ self-fashioned image as “Western scholars.” While the Jesuits adapted the performance of extreme unction and baptism to the gender sensitivities of the Chinese elite, they found a different solution for matrimony: dispensing with it altogether. The Jesuits did not require their converts to
validate their marriages through the Catholic sacrament, but allowed them to celebrate their marriages according to Chinese custom. According to several Jesuit authors, this was necessary because of how explosive the issue of public marriage ceremonies was in the Chinese context. To expose a young bride to the gaze of foreign missionaries and Catholic communities was a delicate matter in a culture where brides were usually led to their grooms’ houses with the greatest discretion. As the missionaries emphasized, no one but the groom could see the bride during Chinese marriage ceremonies: “The bride is sent to the house of the groom in a sedan chair. . . . Then a servant hands the key of the sedan chair over to the groom, and he is the only one who is allowed to open it in order to receive the bride.”

Marriage ceremonies were, in a sense, a condensed expression of how greatly valued female seclusion was in China’s Confucian culture. Interfering with them therefore appeared unwise to the Jesuits.

The Jesuits could justify their omission of the sacrament of matrimony to Roman authorities by saying that the canons of the Council of Trent, which had declared the sacrament to be a necessary prerequisite for the validation of marriage, had not been published in China. The administration of the sacrament was therefore optional in China by dint of this omission, as had already been declared in 1621, in an instruction issued by the superiors and visitors of the China mission. The resolutions resulting from the Canton conference in 1667 repeated this view, instructing the missionaries to “carefully explain to their Christians the indissolubility of the marital bond, and teach them the necessary dispositions for that sacrament and for receiving its grace,” while refraining from actually administering the sacrament.

Because Chinese Catholic marriages were not celebrated in church and sanctioned by the sacrament of matrimony, the Jesuits increasingly turned their attention to Chinese wedding customs, some of which served as a substitute to Chinese Catholics for Catholic ceremonies. According to a description written by Alvaro Semedo around 1640, these non-Catholic wedding celebrations traditionally lasted for a considerable period. They began with “compliments and civilities,” exchanged as soon as the parents of the future spouses had agreed on the dowry: “First, the fiancé sends a present of meat, wine, and fruit to his fiancée. Second, the exact date is chosen with the help of astrologers and ceremonies. Third, the family of the fiancé asks the girl’s name. Fourth, the husband has to send rings, earrings, and jewels to his future wife.” The day before the actual marriage took place, the future wife’s furniture was carried over to her new home in a
public procession. Another procession was held on the wedding day, when the groom and his close relatives went to fetch the bride, who was carried to her new home in a sedan chair closed by key. Upon arrival, the sedan chair was ceremoniously opened, and the spouses, who usually had never seen each other before, “retire[d] to an oratory of the idols,” where the images of their ancestors were displayed. As Semedo described: “After four genuflections, which people usually do on such occasions, they go to a great hall in order to pay the same honor to their parents seated on chairs. Thereafter, the wife retires to the women’s apartments together with her mother-in-law, her female attendants, and the marriage broker.” The bride’s genuflections before her husband’s ancestors and her parents-in-law marked the climax and the end of a Chinese non-Catholic wedding ceremony. Various festivities continued during the month that followed. These, however, were not described in detail by Semedo.

Did the Jesuits allow their converts to perform all the Chinese ceremonies described by Semedo? Only minor alterations, in fact, were imposed on Chinese Catholic marriages, aimed at purging them of superstition and idolatry. The Jesuits forbade Catholics from consulting astrologers to determine an auspicious wedding date, a practice they deemed superstitious.

They prohibited them, furthermore, from bowing before the “idolatrous” images that were sometimes displayed on the domestic altars next to the ancestral tablets. The Jesuit practice of not attending Catholic marriage celebrations in person did, however, have a drawback: they could not exercise tight control over the rituals performed on these occasions. It is not surprising, then, that the mendicants accused them of neglecting strict enforcement of the prohibitions during the rites controversy.

Preventing Catholics from performing superstitious or idolatrous marriage ceremonies proved especially difficult in cases of mixed marriages—marriages, that is, between Catholic and non-Catholic partners. Because of the difficulties arising from these unions, the Catholic Church had prohibited them by pronouncing that disparity of cult (disparitas cultus) was an impediment to marriage. Chinese Catholics were, however, allowed to contract such mixed marriages due to papal privileges obtained by the Jesuits that permitted them to dispense their flock from this impediment. Wedding ceremonies performed on the occasion of marriage between Catholic brides and non-Catholic husbands were an especially thorny issue because they took place in the grooms’ home. Non-Catholic families often required Catholic brides to bow in front of images of Chinese deities. Although the missionaries proudly reported that several Catholic brides had heroically
resisted the demands of their pagan in-laws, the fact that marriage celebrations lay beyond the missionaries’ control made it difficult for them to find a durable solution to this problem. The Jesuits proposed that Catholic wives marrying non-Catholic husbands should pray in front of a cross while their husbands carried out their “idolatrous” devotions. However, because this solution depended on the non-Catholic husband’s consent, it was likely only partially implemented.

While Chinese ceremonies prevailed during Catholic marriages, the Jesuits nevertheless encouraged their followers to introduce additional Catholic elements into the celebrations. They reported that some Catholics, among them Xu Guangqi’s nephew, Fulgence, prepared themselves for matrimony by way of a general confession. Other Catholics asked the missionaries to read a Mass for the special occasion of their wedding. Only in a few cases, and only when a Catholic couple expressly wished it, was the sacrament of matrimony administered in the form prescribed by the Council of Trent.

“LIKE YIN AND YANG”: ALFONSO VAGNONE’S ADVICE FOR HUSBANDS (CA. 1630)

The Jesuits’ strategy of minimal intervention in Chinese weddings meant that their treatment of the issue in their Chinese catechetical writings was limited to brief references. Nevertheless, they published one noteworthy treatise expounding their view of the marital bond to the Chinese in greater detail: The Government of the Family in the West (Qijia xixue). This advice manual for male family heads was informed by Western ethics, and the first of the book’s five scrolls (juan) contained a detailed chapter on the government of spouses (qi fufu). It offered practical advice about the selection of marriage partners, the organization of the conjugal relationship, and the virtues to be cultivated by husbands and wives. It addressed aspects of Chinese marriage, furthermore, that contradicted Catholic marriage custom, namely, polygyny, divorce, and remarriage. It is thus a valuable source for gleaning at least a general impression of how Chinese and European ideas about marriage converged and diverged and the way they were perceived by the treatise’s author, Alfonso Vagnone.

Vagnone was an Italian Jesuit based in Jiangzhou, in southern Shanxi, from 1625 to 1640. He was well versed in Chinese classical scriptures and a prolific writer of Chinese Catholic publications. With the help of a group of eminent Catholic literati from Jiangzhou—the Han and the Duan brothers—he authored a great many publications. These included books
aimed at a Catholic readership and books addressed at educated, but not necessarily Catholic, audiences. His *Government of the Family in the West* belonged to the second category. It was part of a tripartite series of writings introducing European ethics to a scholarly Chinese audience. Borrowing from formulations found in *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*), the three parts were dedicated to the “cultivation of the person in the West,” the “government of the family in the West,” and the “government of the country.”

*The Government of the Family in the West* was a curious graft of a European literary genre onto Chinese textual tradition. Its title resonated with the vast Chinese genre of household instructions (*jiaxun*), where male authors provided a male readership with advice about the management of domestic affairs. It was modeled, simultaneously, on the European genre of *oeconomica* literature, treating classical *oeconomica* topics such as advice for married couples, children’s education, and the government of servants. The treatise presented the advice in the form of metaphors, proverbs, and short exemplary stories (*sententiae*). These rhetorical forms were readily understood by a Chinese audience, since one of China’s most revered classical texts, Confucius’s *Analects* (*Lunyu*), presented its contents in a similar way.

The content of *The Government of the Family in the West*, and more specifically its chapter on the government of spouses, also oscillated between the European and Chinese literary traditions. On the one hand, it was strongly informed by contemporary European advice literature on marriage. It made use of analogies recurrent in popular European moral tracts, comparing the process of selecting a spouse with that of catching a fish and comparing the collaboration between husband and wife with that between a pair of oxen joining forces to pull a vehicle under the same yoke. Famous conjugal couples from the European literary tradition were deployed to illustrate some of the treatise’s arguments. The stories of Socrates and Xanthippe exemplified how even wise men could fall prey to a quarrelsome wife, and the story of Samson and Delilah demonstrated the dangers loquacious wives posed to husbands. Like other Jesuit authors of Chinese moral books, Vagnone also drew on a great number of Greek and Roman authors, including Plato, Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, and Cato. Reference to these authors showed Chinese readers, who had much appreciation for history, that Europe had its own tradition of wisdom that had been preserved since antiquity.

In addition to these topoi, Vagnone integrated a conspicuous number of references to Chinese classical sources into the chapter on the government
of spouses. He promoted the ideal of monogamy by referring to the correlative relation between the principles of *yin* and *yang*, a key metaphor for male-female relations in Chinese culture. He referenced a phrase from the “Xici” commentary of *The Book of Changes* (Yijing)—“Once *yin*, once *yang*, this constitutes what is called the Way.” And Vagnone explained how “the principle of ‘one *yin*, one *yang*’” should reign in every household: “If there is too much *yin*, the time sequences are necessarily perverted, and the ten thousand things thrown into chaos. How should it work if many women are joined with one man in every house?” Vagnone also found other concepts in *The Book of Changes* supporting favorable evaluations of monogamy. Referring to a passage from the “Tuanzhuan” commentary—“The man has his correct place in the outer, and the wife has her correct place in the inner”—Vagnone contended that inner and outer should be equally valued and a balance should be created by matching one woman with one man. Vagnone also used Chinese classical texts to highlight principles accepted by both European Catholic and Chinese Confucian marriage ethics. Alluding to the *Balanced Inquiries* (Lunheng), and to the Confucian norm of the “Thrice Following” (*sancong*), he claimed that “the woman is *yin*, the man is *yang*; therefore the wife is obliged to follow the husband.” Vagnone reinforced this with a corresponding European metaphor that equated husband and wife with sun and moon, one radiating and the other reflecting the light.

*The Government of the Family in the West* was written for a male readership and, as a consequence, was forthright with misogynist views on women. Misogynist authors in early modern Europe’s dispute over the nature of women, the *querelle des femmes*, had bequeathed a vast reservoir of metaphors for Vagnone to tap into. It is therefore not surprising that he was at pains to warn his readers about quarrelsome, jealous, and idle wives. These statements were probably meant in part to satisfy the expectations of a Chinese male audience, which was acquainted with the misogynist views presented in Chinese “household instruction” literature, where women were often seen as the source of domestic chaos and evil. They also, however, aided Vagnone in advocating celibacy, monogamy, and marital chastity. “If one [woman] is already difficult to govern, how much more difficult is it to govern many?” he asked, rhetorically, in his argument for monogamy. And, in a paragraph promoting abstinence from remarriage, he explained that a spouse’s death was less a misfortune than a chance for spiritual growth. “If a fish was lucky and escaped the basket trap, if a bird was lucky and escaped the cage, they know [about the danger] and take
guard against it afterwards,” he explained; “if men, although being much
cleverer than wild beasts, do not act accordingly, they will surely hurt
themselves.”

Marriage was a necessary evil in Vagnone’s eyes, from which
most men could not escape and which, due to the indissolubility of the
marital bond, had to be endured until death. However, if men had to taste
the bitterness of marriage, they could at least alleviate their situation by
choosing a modest and virtuous wife, by refraining from taking concu-
bines, and by living a chaste widower’s life after their wife’s death.

Despite its misogynist impetus, Vagnone’s chapter on the government
of spouses sought nevertheless to strengthen the marital bond—the found-
dation of Catholic marriage. Vagnone therefore attached great importance
to collaboration between the spouses, which was, in accordance with Cath-
olic views on marriage, represented as a key factor for the prosperity of the
family. He explained that husbands should not rule over their wives just
as princes ruled over their subjects. “For the husband should regard his wife
as a companion, not as a servant. Their relationship is not only a connec-
tion of things otherwise separate, but resembles the connection of bones
and flesh. If a husband knows this, he will share his authority with his
wife.” Vagnone encouraged men to choose a wife of equal age, social
standing, and mental capacities in order to ensure conjugal harmony and
further collaboration. This envisioning of the conjugal relationship as a
relationship between equals had a familiar ring for a Chinese audience. It
corresponded with ancient Chinese conceptions of the wife as the “inner
helpmate” of her husband, conceptions invigorated during the seventeenth
century by an emerging “cult of emotion” (qing) praising the ideal of com-
panionate marriage. Vagnone, however, went even further in his efforts to
strengthen the marital bond. He envisioned it as the most vital relationship
within the family. It was, in his eyes, even more important than the rela-
tionship between father and son. The married couple, Vagnone reminded
the reader at the chapter’s outset, was the foundation of the family (jia):
“First there are husband and wife, then there are sons and daughters. If there
are husband, wife, sons, and daughters, then there are servants within and
tenants without [the house]. A wide array of household chores result from
this [order]. Therefore husband and wife are the root of the family.”

The idea that the marital couple was the principal unit of every family,
and that the marital bond should, as a consequence, be held in particular
esteem, was novel in China. The Confucian view of the family insisted on
the primacy of the relationship between father and son over the conju-
gal relationship—a view upheld even by Chinese Catholic authors. The
implications of Vagnone’s vision, namely, the impossibility of divorce and polygyny, were consequently hard for a Chinese audience to accept. The Jesuits tried to tackle these incompatible notions of marriage in various ways.

**AN INDISSOLUBLE BOND?**

Soon after arriving in the Middle Kingdom, the Jesuits remarked that divorce was a common practice in China. Manuel Dias the Elder addressed this fact in his “Information . . . about Marriage” (Informatione . . . circa il matrimonio; written in the early 1610s). There he stated that “the laws entitle the Chinese to repudiate their wives in six or seven cases” and that “commoners repudiate their women even more easily, either because they are not satisfied with them, or because they have no sons, or because the mandarins . . . order them to sell [their wives] in order to pay off debts.” Dias therefore suggested that the Pauline Privilege, which allowed divorced husbands to stay with their second wives if the latter agreed to become Christian, should be accorded to the Chinese, a request that was granted to the China mission during Nicolas Trigault’s stay in Rome in 1615–16. With this dispensation, the issue of divorce largely disappeared from the Jesuits’ agenda. The Jesuits’ correspondence only rarely referred to controversies arising from it. We do not know whether that was because they were able to resolve most problems with the help of the Pauline Privilege or because they passed over the issue in silence. However, while Chinese divorce played only a minor role in the Jesuits’ field reports, it did later become the focus of an erudite theological debate in the second half of the seventeenth century. This focused on whether or not Chinese marriages were valid and erupted after a clash between the Jesuits and a Dominican, Domingo Navarrete, during the missionary gathering in Canton in 1667.

In canon law the question of the validity of marriages to infidels was a classical one. From Thomas Aquinas onward, the church generally answered it in the affirmative. Aquinas had defined matrimony as an institution of natural, human, and divine law and thus declared marriages concluded prior to conversion as valid—provided that they had been concluded within the scope of natural and human law. That made it necessary for the missionaries to pay close attention to indigenous marriage customs to clarify whether the previous unions of newly converted Christians were valid marriages. The latter were defined by being an indissoluble union between a man and a woman concluded for the goal of procreation.
Although marriage had to be monogamous in principle, polygamy was only a divine interdiction of secondary importance because it did not contradict procreation, the principal goal of marriage. Polygamous marriages were therefore essentially valid. However, because they went against the second goal of marriage—the union and collaboration of the spouses—they had to be transformed into monogamous marriages before conversion.\textsuperscript{66}

Since polygyny did not present an obstacle to the validity of Chinese marriages, discussion focused around their indissolubility. Answers to this question determined the church’s attitude toward the marriages of newly converted Catholics. If the unions concluded between infidels were deemed valid, they had to be respected by the church, and converts were obliged to stay with the wives whom they had married before converting. If they were considered invalid, newly converted Catholics were free to choose their marriage partners, regardless of their unions concluded prior to conversion. This also made the Pauline Privilege superfluous, because a spouse was not legally obliged to any spouse married before baptism. The Jesuits in China generally held the view that the marriages concluded between Chinese infidels were indissoluble and therefore valid.\textsuperscript{67} As a case in point, Alvaro Semedo explained that ancient Chinese books clearly stated that “marriages are made in China by way of an indissoluble contract.”\textsuperscript{68} In their proto-ethnographic writing, Jesuit authors only rarely referred to the existence of the seven reasons for repudiating a wife, mentioning only the dissolubility of the unions with concubines.\textsuperscript{69}

There was a specific reason why the Jesuits regarded the affirmation of the indissolubility of Chinese marriages to be of primary importance. The actual stakes were, in fact, not only the dissolubility of the marriages of Chinese converts but also the moral integrity and civility of the Chinese. According to a treatise written by Prospero Intorcetta in 1669, titled “On Chinese Marriages” (De Matrimonio Sinensium), the idea that Chinese marriages were invalid “would insult the whole Chinese nation. [It would mean that] the Europeans slandered the Chinese, without reason and bare of a firm fundament, . . . [by saying] that all those who had married according to the customs of the country were the parents of illegitimate children, and that all wives were concubines, and all men adulterers and fornicators.”\textsuperscript{70} Intorcetta’s defense of the validity of Chinese marriages shows that this was a symbolically and highly charged question for the missionaries.\textsuperscript{71} It is therefore not surprising that the Jesuits used their proto-ethnographic writings to ensure that the indissolubility of Chinese marriages was accepted by a European readership.
While the question of the validity of Chinese marriages had not led to major discussions during the first decades of the mission, the situation changed radically in the late 1660s. The resolutions formulated during the Canton conference in 1667 then triggered a major debate about the validity of Chinese marriages. In Canton, the Jesuits had stated that Chinese marriages were “true and legitimate, regardless of some abuses [that could be found in China].” This opinion was not shared by the Dominican friar Domingo Navarrete. Indeed, Navarrete had the impression that Chinese men repudiated their wives with “great facility.” During the discussions in Canton, furthermore, he had learned that the validity of Chinese marriages had been contested by no less than the famous Roman College (Collegio Romano) of the Society of Jesus, whose theologians had opined that Chinese marriages were invalid in 1616. That the Jesuits in China had chosen to ignore the Roman College’s unfavorable judgment of Chinese marriages prompted Navarrete to ask the Propaganda Fide for a fresh consideration of the issue. After his detention in Canton, he immediately set out for Rome, where he arrived in December 1672 and lobbied against the Jesuits in China during a sixteen-month stay. In a long catalog of doubts presented to the Propaganda Fide in 1674, he explained that there was “rather serious dissent among missionaries on the question whether marriages of those countries are valid or not.” He pointed out that Confucius had “ordered his followers to observe five impediments that allowed the separation of a marriage.” Did those impediments not run counter to the indissolubility of marriage?

Navarrete’s attack on the Jesuits’ attitude toward Chinese marriage provoked a response from Prospero Intorcetta. This procurator was dispatched by the Jesuits in China and stayed in Rome at the same time as his Dominican opponent, trying to refute Navarrete’s accusations in the (above-mentioned) treatise “On Chinese Marriages.” Intorcetta tried to substantiate the position maintained by the Jesuits during the Canton conference: that Chinese marriages were valid and that the instances of divorce occurring in China had to be regarded as exceptions to the rule. According to Intorcetta, the notion that Chinese marriages were invalid and could therefore be dissolved at will posed a great danger to the mission in China. He warned the Roman authorities that if missionaries started to dissolve Chinese marriages that would give rise to much scandal and could seriously damage the mission’s reputation. Although Intorcetta conceded that there were “seven conditions” mentioned in Chinese law and in the Confucian classics, he held that they had only marginal influence over
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educated Chinese discourse on marriage. According to the Jesuit, Chinese literati unequivocally advocated the indissolubility of marriage. To substantiate his claim, Intorcetta quoted extensively from Chinese classics and documented his sources by rendering the Chinese wording in the margins of the manuscript.

Most prominently, Intorcetta referred to a sentence in *The Book of Rites* that declared: “If [a woman] is joined with her husband, she should stay with him until death. . . . Even if their husband should die, [women] do not marry again.” Although this was actually intended to illustrate the Confucian virtue of wifely faithfulness, Intorcetta pointed out that the Chinese interpreters (interpretes) of *The Book of Rites* had expounded the meaning of the passage in a more encompassing manner. The Han dynasty scholar Zheng Xuan, for instance, had stated that “‘To join’ [qi] means that [husband and wife] persevere in sharing their meals, and that they stay together, regardless of their social standing.” Intorcetta translated this with an additional emphasis on the indissolubility of marriage: “‘To join’ [qi] means that the conjugal bond should be such that [the spouses] shall be always united, firmly and with perseverance, also with regard to their sustenance, whether they are honorable or mean people, and whether they enjoy honors or have an adverse fortune.”

Intorcetta found additional evidence for the idea of an indissoluble marital bond in Chinese moral literature aimed at a female readership, a literary genre that was otherwise not frequently cited by the missionaries. Reading *Obligatory Readings for the Inner Quarter* (Guimen bidu)—a compilation better known under the title *Four Books for Women* (Nü sishu)—he found that it contained considerable evidence for the indissolubility of Chinese marriages. In *The Classic of Filial Piety for Women* (Nü xiaojing), for instance, he found a statement that “the wife is earth, the husband is heaven; neither can be dispensed with.” This was because, in the words of the “classic” once again, “heaven and earth are interconnected and pervasive, with no space between them,” clear evidence for Intorcetta of the indissolubility of the Chinese conjugal bond. Further evidence was provided by a sentence in Ban Zhao’s *Lessons for Women* (Nüjie), which, in Intorcetta’s translation, declared that “the affection and union between husband and wife should not separate or dissolve for all their lives.” This was, however, an enhanced translation of the Chinese original, which actually did not contain the words union and dissolve, but merely stated that “the affection between husband and wife should not cease for all their lives.”
In seeking to prove the existence of the idea of an indissoluble marriage bond in China by referring to textual evidence of the Chinese literary tradition, Intorcetta used a strategy that he and his collaborators also employed in one of the China Jesuits’ most famous publications, *Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher*. Just as his translation of the Confucian Four Books attempted to prove the existence of a natural religion in ancient China, the Chinese texts used in the treatise “On Chinese Marriages” were cited to convince the Roman authorities of the indissolubility of Chinese marriages. And, just as with the translation of the Four Books, which was also closely intertwined with the Jesuits’ admiring view of Chinese civilization, such positive assessments influenced Intorcetta’s translation of passages from Chinese classics.⁸⁵

Nothing, unfortunately, is known about the reception of Intorcetta’s treatise by the Roman authorities. What is known, however, is that the final settlement of the issue by the Holy Office was comparably favorable to the Jesuits. Instead of making a clear decision, the theologians contented themselves with stating that the reasons for divorce listed in Confucian scriptures were “not impediments that [allow for] a dissolution of marriage”⁹⁶—which was to merely say that they disapproved of the Confucian “seven conditions.” Rome remained silent about the consequences of this statement for the validity of Chinese marriages. This strategy was consistent with a statement on the validity of Japanese marriages made in 1669, when the Holy Office had declared that “this matter should not be defined.”⁹⁷

**THE JESUIT STRIVE AGAINST POLYGyny**

Divorce was the focus of the missionaries’ discussions about the validity of Chinese marriages. It was not, however, a major issue in the mission field, since it did not represent an obstacle to conversion. That was contrasted with another set of Chinese marriage customs: polygyny. Since polygynous men could under no circumstances be admitted to baptism, the Jesuits were confronted with the difficult task of persuading their prospective converts to follow the Christian principle of “one husband, one wife” (*yi fu yi fu*). This was a delicate undertaking. The most ancient Chinese texts had already referred to the practice of polygyny, stating that even the sage kings, Yao and Shun, had been married to several women.⁸⁸ As a consequence, the Jesuits generally regarded polygyny as one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of Catholicism in China.⁹⁹
What made the problem of polygyny especially acute for the Jesuits was its preponderance among the Chinese scholarly elite, for whom it was an important symbol of social status. Only a few male members of the scholar-gentry considered baptism worth the dismissal of their concubines. Matteo Ricci therefore wrote, in 1605, that “if their polygamy, which is rather common among the important people of this country, had not prevented them [from converting], we would already have gained some rather illustrious people.” Indeed, annual letters dating from the first half of the seventeenth century often reported that scholars, and even imperial officials, became interested in Catholicism, but then delayed baptism out of concern for their concubines and their reputation, which would have been damaged if they had sent the women away.

Many literati sympathizers of Catholicism who chose to retain their concubines, instead of receiving baptism, contented themselves with supporting the conversion of their wives—who, unlike polygynous men and their concubines, were usually admitted to baptism. A famous example was the Nanjing viceroy Tong Guoqi (d. 1685), whose wife was baptized Agatha and then became one of the seventeenth century’s most important female supporters of Catholicism. In a society whose members did not emphasize religious affiliation, but rather made use of the services of religious specialists according to changing spiritual needs, these men probably felt relaxed about sharing in Catholicism’s spiritual benefits by way of loose association with the missionaries and via their wives’ pious devotion. It was, in fact, uncommon that a religious specialist claimed the right to interfere with his devotees’ personal lives—requiring them, as missionaries did, to change their sexual habits. That Chinese literati struggled to comply with this requirement is illustrated by the biography of the famous Catholic official Yang Tingyun. It reported how, when talking with a Catholic friend, Li Zhizao, Yang complained about the Jesuits’ inflexibility: “The Western Fathers are really strange. I, with [my power] as censor, am serving them, so, why is it not possible [to receive baptism]? Can they not just allow me to have one concubine? It would not have been the case with Buddhist followers!”

Those literati who decided to send their concubines away seem to have been few in number. Some literati agreed to renounce polygyny during the last years of their lives. This practice corresponded with a traditional Chinese cultural pattern, according to which concubines were likely to be “evicted from home if a sudden upsurge of morality overwhelmed an aging
clansman." Those Chinese officials who were at the height of a prolific career, however, and whose conversion would have substantially increased Catholicism’s public visibility and political influence, were only rarely ready to risk loss of social prestige through public conversion. Younger literati who, like Yang Tingyun, eventually decided to send their concubines away were likely to experience backlash in their milieu, especially if a concubine had borne them sons. Along with social pressure, emotional ties further complicated the matter for prospective converts. Annual letters reported cases where men hesitated to send a concubine away because they loved her or where they took their repudiated concubine back as soon as their legitimate wife died. Some of them changed their minds after having sent the women away and took them back after baptism. This was only accepted by the missionaries if there was a pressing reason. Such was the case with a Shanxi Catholic who took back his deathly ill concubine in order to nurse her in 1632.

Besides hindering the conversion of influential sympathizers of Catholicism, the prohibition of polygyny posed problems for Catholic literati whose legal wives did not bear them children. Edifying stories recorded in annual letters show that childless Catholic literati were often exposed to considerable pressure by their family and friends if they refused to take a concubine. Many of them struggled for a long time with the “temptation” of polygyny, as the Jesuits usually called it. Some, among them the famous Catholic literatus Wang Zheng (1571–1644), eventually bowed to the pressure and took a concubine. In a moving autobiographical document, Wang recounted how he had been persuaded by his family to take a concubine after his sons had died of smallpox: “My wife and my daughters knelt down and entreated me, the brothers and nephews wept.” After that, Wang could no more resist the “heterodox thought” (xiénián) of taking a concubine, which led to his excommunication.

The Jesuits’ perception of polygyny as a major obstacle for their mission stimulated their collection of proto-ethnographic knowledge about it. They were especially interested in the difference between legal wives (qi) and concubines (qie), which was important for their evaluation of their prospective converts’ marriages. Matteo Ricci and Diego de Pantoja had already noted how the social status of concubines was much lower than that of legal wives, and how it was more accurate to speak of buying a concubine than of marrying her. After Ricci and Pantoja, it was, again, Alvaro Semedo who wrote an especially detailed account of the differences between the two. He explained that legitimate marriages were concluded by contract
and celebrated with ceremonies. Concubine marriages, by contrast, “entailed neither the form nor the duties of a marriage” and were therefore “strictly speaking not a marriage.” It was easy for a man to dissolve such a union, and society tolerated repudiated concubines entering unions with different men. Semedo also noted that concubines were often sold by brokers, who had taught these girls to sing and play music to get higher prices for them. After they entered the household, they were treated differently than legitimate wives: “They eat in a separate apartment. They are under the authority of the legal wives and have to serve them like servants. Their children do not pay respect to them like they do to legal wives; neither do they call them ‘mother.’

Although concubines’ children were obliged to observe mourning upon the death of the legal wife, they were not required to do so when their biological mother died. While Chinese law permitted concubine marriage only in the case of childlessness, Semedo admitted that this law was not respected by most rich people, who took “concubines and mistresses without any difficulty even if they [already] had children.”

The Jesuits developed different strategies for refuting polygyny in their Chinese publications, especially in their catechetical and moral writings. These publications usually advanced two arguments in favor of monogamy. They maintained, first, that monogamy was a godly ordained principle and held, second, that monogamous unions were more likely to produce heirs and were thus more in accordance with the Confucian precept of filiality.

The argument for monogamy as a godly ordained principle was first made in Diego Pantoja’s moral treatise on the seven deadly sins, The Seven Victories [over Sin] (Qike), published in the early 1610s. In this Christian moral book, Pantoja explained that monogamy was a principle universally followed in Western countries, with no exceptions made, not even for princes. Men were allowed to marry a legitimate wife, but not to marry concubines. This principle, Pantoja explained, was as old as the world itself. Pantoja admitted that the patriarchs of the Old Testament had practiced polygamy. But, he explained, this did not diminish the importance of the principle of monogamy: “In the beginning, the multiplication of people was the most urgent matter, and therefore men joined themselves with several wives, so that life was created more quickly. Afterward, however, the Lord of Heaven expressly made the principle of one husband joining one wife the only orthodox rite of marriage.”

The Jesuits both made such arguments from Christian tradition and tried to meet Chinese objections against them. One of these objections was that polygyny was a remedy against heirlessness. Giulio Aleni claimed
that this was not the case. In his Questions and Answers about the West (Xifang dawen, 1637), he explained: “Many children are born and bred in my native country by the grace and favor of God, the Creator. On the other hand, in countries where marriage takes place early and concubines are allowed, people are often without heirs.”

Concubines were not, in the missionaries’ view, a good solution for those desiring to beget an heir, as they cost considerable sums of money and caused domestic chaos and sexual depletion. The pointlessness of taking concubines was even more evident because, as Francesco Brancati explained in a catechetical text published in the 1670s, childbirth depended on God’s will, which could not be altered. This also meant that polygyny could never be excused as an act of filiality. Rather, it was an unfilial act toward one’s most authoritative father, the Christian God.

Persuading prospective converts of the lawfulness of monogamy was thus one challenge facing the Jesuits. Organizing those prospective converts’ transition from polygyny to monogamy was another. In this regard, two questions were especially pressing. Missionaries had to decide, first, with which woman the monogamous union was to be concluded and then, second, what should happen with the women repudiated by their converts.

As an answer to the first question, the laws of the church required polygynous prospective converts to stay with their legal wives. Because this solution was not always workable in practice, an extension of the Pauline Privilege made it possible for the missionaries to accept unions with a concubine if the latter agreed to conversion. However, the Jesuits soon noted that this was insufficient for solving the problem. The missionaries of Nanjing reported in 1602, for example, that a literatus aspiring for baptism, despite being widowed, turned down their offer of making his concubine his legal wife—probably due to her humble social background. They remarked that “it is a dishonor in China to make a woman who had previously been a concubine a legal wife,” something that prevented many literati from converting. During the early 1610s, Manuel Dias the Elder addressed this problem in his “Information.” He requested a dispensation from the Holy See allowing Catholic literati to treat their concubines according to the rites specific to them, instead of paying them the honors due to a legitimate wife. According to Dias, this was an acceptable solution: “The divine law does not prescribe that the women have to be treated with such or such exterior courtesy, but only that a man should only have one wife and keep her forever.” Of course, his compromise contradicted the Christian
idea of conjugal equality upheld by the Catholic Church. The Holy Office granted the Jesuits in China an appropriate dispensation, nonetheless, during Nicolas Trigault’s stay in Rome in 1615–16.\footnote{119}

As to what should happen with repudiated concubines, the missionaries quietly accepted various solutions found by their converts: to marry their concubines to someone else (probably often tantamount to selling the women), “to give them separate dwellings,” or to send them back to their native families.\footnote{120} The Jesuits recognized, however, that all these practices were considered dishonorable by the literati class.\footnote{121} As a consequence, they started to consider solutions less offensive to the latter’s sensitivities. Specifically, they pondered whether their converts could be granted permission to retain a concubine in their home when they took solemn vows of sexual abstinence. In 1613 Niccolò Longobardo wrote a detailed justification of this practice. He maintained that there was reason to believe that polygyny would gradually disappear with increasing numbers of converted literati if this concession were made to Chinese Catholics. If, however, the Roman authorities were not prepared to make the concession, Longobardo feared that there was no hope for the conversion of the Chinese scholarly elite.\footnote{122}

Longobardo’s request did not lead to a formal solution of the problem. The superior handed over his commentary to the procurator of the China mission, Nicolas Trigault, who was ordered to obtain a corresponding dispensation from the Roman authorities.\footnote{123} As far as we know, however, the latter did not respond positively or negatively to the request. The Roman silence may have encouraged the Jesuits to occasionally allow their converts to retain their old concubines after formally vowing sexual abstinence. That, at least, is suggested by some accusations made by the mendicants in the late 1660s.\footnote{124}

The Jesuits’ discussions of Chinese polygyny are multifaceted. It is striking, however, that they focused almost exclusively on how to regulate polygynous men’s sexuality to make them conform to Catholic notions of marriage and, as a consequence, fulfill the preconditions for conversion.\footnote{125} Women’s fate, indeed, was only of secondary importance for the Jesuits. If it was taken into account—as, for instance, during debates about whether repudiated concubines should be allowed to stay in their master’s household—it merely figured as a factor that might, potentially, affect a male convert’s social prestige. The Jesuits’ lack of interest in the fate of concubines points, once again, to how they concentrated their evangelical efforts on the much-honored and politically influential male literati elite. That meant that
not only were the missionaries not especially interested in evangelizing 
women. It also meant that they would accept a Confucian scholar’s conver-
sion even when it implied that a concubine would face an uncertain future.

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The Jesuits’ imposition of Catholic marriage norms on their Chinese 
converts affected women’s lives in various ways. The Jesuits’ attempt to 
strengthen the conjugal bond by purging Chinese marriage customs from 
the practices of divorce and polygyny strengthened legal wives’ position 
within the family and affected the lives of concubines in a less predictable 
way. Their toleration of mixed marriages confronted Catholic wives of non-
Catholic husbands with the sometimes difficult task of continuing Catholic 
devotion in non-Catholic environments and of resisting participation in 
“pagan” devotions. The Jesuits’ envisioning of Chinese Catholic marriage 
had these effects without women being their primary focus. The Jesuits 
aimed at regulating male literati’s sexuality in order to facilitate their con-
version, rather than to make female converts.

None of that, however, meant that women were insignificant opponents 
or advocates of Chinese Catholicism or that they were merely passive recip-
ients of Jesuit evangelization. On the contrary, Catholic women used the 
freedom granted them by the Jesuits’ restraint toward the female sex for 
their own ends, as I show in the next chapters. They created their own social 
networks and forms of sociability, they lent material support to the Catho-
lic enterprise in their own ways, and they established their own forms of 
piety and devotion.