5. Praying for Progeny: Women and Catholic Spiritual Remedies

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The Jesuits’ abhorrence of the Chinese practice of killing or abandoning unwanted infants after birth has received considerable attention from historians, but it was not the only Chinese practice connected to maternity that was of relevance to Catholic missionary work.\(^1\) Another area of contact amply documented by the Jesuits was women’s devotions aiming at reproductive success. These devotions are of particular interest to researchers because they were practiced by Chinese women across religious boundaries.

To give birth to and to raise (preferably male) offspring in order to ensure the continuity of the patriline was considered the most important duty of wives in late imperial China.\(^2\) Women were accepted as full members of their husband’s families only after having produced or adopted a male heir. So important was the birthing of children that it was usual in non-Catholic families to address women as “so-and-so’s mother” instead of using a personal name.\(^3\) Yet biological reproduction in Ming and Qing China, just as in other premodern societies, was a potentially dangerous and largely uncontrollable process threatened by sterility, complications during delivery, and infant mortality.\(^4\) Hence, it is not surprising that spiritual support for reproductive success figured prominently among Chinese women’s religious needs.

Historians of China, and especially historians of gender, have unearthed a vast range of spiritual remedies against reproductive disorders to which women of the late imperial period resorted.\(^5\) Young married women hoping to become pregnant (and sometimes also their mothers-in-law) worshipped child-granting deities, whose altars were exclusively frequented by female devotees and could be found in virtually any large Chinese temple of the late imperial period.\(^6\) Pregnant women tried to avoid inauspicious influences of ghosts and planets by consulting household almanacs for the “positions and directions” by which these could be evaded.\(^7\) Furthermore,
rituals and religious specialists played an important role during childbirth.\textsuperscript{8} Practices belonging to “ritual obstetrics,” which had been an integral part of erudite gynecology (\textit{fuke}) during the Song dynasty, were probably still used by various sorts of medical practitioners and healers even after they had dropped out of erudite medical discourse during the Ming era.\textsuperscript{9} Also, deities and religious specialists were asked for help during difficult deliveries. As a case in point, the late Ming scholar Zhang Dai recorded that his mother, facing a particularly difficult delivery, sought the protection of the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin, chanting the “White-Robed Guanyin Sutra” throughout her strenuous labor.\textsuperscript{10} In the same vein, literati of eighteenth-century Hangzhou reported that parturient women of the city sought the help of Buddhist monks from the Bamboo Grove Monastery (Zhulin Si), who were famous for their miraculously effective birth medicine.\textsuperscript{11}

Although it is unclear how far the Jesuits observed the richness of Chinese devotions aiming at reproductive success, it is clear that they soon understood that, if Catholicism was to appeal to women, it had to prove efficacious as a “fertility religion.” Building on their general medical expertise, often sought after by the Chinese population, they developed a specialization in reproductive disorders.\textsuperscript{12} Testifying to this development is the large Portuguese-Chinese dictionary compiled by Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci between 1583 and 1598, which contained a wide range of vocabulary relating to the reproductive cycle, including entries for sterility (\textit{busheng erzi}), conception and pregnancy (\textit{youyun}, \textit{huaiyun}, \textit{youtai}), and midwife (\textit{shengpo}), as well as a dozen entries for terms connected to infancy and lactation.\textsuperscript{13} Annual letters, furthermore, show that the missionaries provided Chinese women with different “spiritual remedies” against reproductive disorders—sacred images and blessed medals, but also prayers and invocations.

Chinese women used Catholic “spiritual remedies” in the hope of receiving immediate spiritual support (\textit{lingying}) and deliverance from reproductive disorders.\textsuperscript{14} What made this adoption of Catholic devotions possible in the Chinese context was the conspicuous convergence of Catholic and Chinese views on divine intervention.\textsuperscript{15} Both Chinese and Catholic devotees commonly shared the opinion that efficacy was a defining feature of a meaningful religious practice and that deities, saints or religious specialists had to be able to respond to the requests of their devotees in an immediate, practical way. In particular, there was a striking likeness between the Chinese idea that rituals and objects could mediate the process of
“beseeching” \( (qiu) \) divine powers for help and the Catholic idea that holy objects and practices \( (sacramentalia) \) had the power to immediately affect the course of a devotee’s life.\(^{16}\)

Furthermore, the acceptance of Christian remedies for reproductive disorders by Chinese protagonists was also facilitated by the prevailing medico-religious pluralism of late imperial China. Chinese people usually did not hesitate to combine medical and spiritual remedies of different traditions. Equally, it was not unusual to simultaneously invite several different ritual specialists in the event of a serious illness—a behavior that has been aptly described as “ritual polytropy.”\(^{17}\) As a case in point, in a passage of the seventeenth-century novel \textit{The Plum in the Golden Vase}, Buddhists, Taoists, and shamans were simultaneously called to perform their rituals at a woman’s sickbed, where they prayed together in a “democracy of extremity.”\(^{18}\)

According to the logic of such efficacy-based religiosity, what mattered was whether a spiritual remedy helped—not whether it was part of one particular religious tradition.

The Chinese inclination toward “ritual polytropy” was a double-edged sword for the Jesuits. On the one hand, the missionaries often took advantage of it, trying to proselytize those who had merely wanted to use their spiritual services. The conversion story of a husband previously opposed to his wife’s Christian faith, in Beijing in 1687, shows that this strategy was sometimes successful, not least due to the immense psychological stress that desperate husbands underwent, fearing for their wives’ lives:

[The man] had a Christian wife, and when she was in the pain of childbirth in November of 1687, a [Jesuit] Father was called in order to take her confession. When this was done, the Father sent for the husband and started to exhort him: “If your wife cannot give birth to this creature, it is because she would have to teach him the cult of the Demon, which is a greater infelicity than not to have been born. Therefore if you believe in the one God, the creator of heaven and earth, and if you have the firm determination to embrace his holy law, I assure you that the childbirth will go well.”\(^{19}\)

In this particular case, the missionary succeeded in converting the husband by saving the lives of his wife and unborn child during the difficult delivery. Other stories, however, show that the dangers of childbirth also caused Catholics to seek aid from non-Catholic religious experts. The Annual Letter of 1618, for instance, reports the story of a Catholic woman...
from a rich family in Nanxiong who gave birth to her son with the help of a Buddhist midwife. After the delivery, the woman requested baptism for her newborn while giving thanks to the Buddha. As might be expected from a narrative included in an annual letter, this story ended with divine punishment for the syncretic mother, her baby dying only some days after baptism. However, it is reasonable to assume that there were just as many cases in which similar relapses into “idolatry” went without the divine punishment expected by the Jesuits. That these cases were not mentioned in the annual letters, which aimed at documenting the mission’s success and God’s active presence in the world, is not surprising.

Missionaries are, however, not the main protagonists of the following two case studies. These focus instead on Catholic saints and the sacred objects used for women’s fertility devotions, asking how these saints were addressed and how sacred objects were used by Chinese women struggling with reproductive disorders. Although a great variety of Catholic devotional objects were used for all kinds of disorders, I concentrate on two Catholic intercessors and their respective powerful objects that proved especially effective in two distinctive realms: the Virgin Mary, as a sought-after mediator of conception, and St. Ignatius, as the protector of women facing difficult births.

**THE SON-GRANTING HOLY MOTHER**

While staying in Zhaoqing in 1586, Matteo Ricci was surprised to note that the Virgin Mary appealed to Chinese women for an unexpected reason. He reported: “Many sterile women went to the house of a Christian to whom we had given an image of the Madonna. They worshipped her and asked her for sons, and they wanted to give her money.” This happened after the rumor had spread that the city prefect’s wife had given birth to a son thanks to the help of the “Western monks.” It eventually prompted Ricci to replace the image of the Holy Virgin with an image of Jesus to prevent visitors from thinking that “the God worshipped by the Europeans was a woman.”

Ricci’s was not the only record of women praying for sons before images of the Virgin Mary. Such stories are in fact a recurrent theme in the Jesuits’ writings. As a case in point, Pedro Canevari reported during the 1640s that Catholic women in Fujian advised their non-Catholic friends to worship the Holy Virgin in order to conceive a child. In the same vein, the Annual Letter of 1639 mentioned a female catechist of Hangzhou who promoted the
worship of the Holy Virgin among childless women by turning their attention to the Infant Jesus placed in Mary’s arms. Chinese women’s worship of the Virgin Mary was probably facilitated by the fact that her picture circulated widely in China. Jesuits displayed European paintings and statues in churches and residences, and Chinese Catholics painted and printed reproductions. These were passed on within local Catholic networks, sold at temple fairs and book markets, and, in one case, even reprinted in a wholly nonreligious book for art connoisseurs edited by a Beijing literatus, Cheng Dayue (figure 5.1).

Several factors contributed to Chinese devotees’ acceptance of the Holy Virgin’s son-granting power. The main reason was probably the iconography used in the majority of her images, which showed her with the Infant Jesus in her arms and thus conspicuously resembling images of the “Son-Granting Guanyin” (Songzi Guanyin). This Buddhist bodhisattva was,
from the sixteenth century onward, frequently depicted as a lady clad in
long garments holding an infant in her arms and was commonly wor-
shipped by women thanks to her power of granting children to those who
offered “obeisance and alms” (figure 5.2).28

By analogy to the child held by the Son-Granting Guanyin, Chinese dev-
otees interpreted the infant held by the Holy Virgin as a sign of her son-
granting power.29 What facilitated this interpretation was the fact that
Guanyin was merely one of a whole range of Chinese goddesses who were
worshipped as child-granting deities, many of whom were, just like the Vir-
gin Mary, addressed by their devotees with the honorary title “Holy
Mother” (Shengmu).30 Although source evidence does not suggest that Chi-
nese women mistook the Virgin Mary for any particular Chinese goddess,
it is reasonable to assume that some of them perceived her as one of the
numerous child-granting deities populating the large Chinese pantheon.
That the boundaries the Chinese devotees drew between the Christian Vir-
gin and Chinese deities were less clear than those of the missionaries is
also suggested by an episode recorded by Niccolò Longobardo in 1598. He

![Fig. 5.2. Statuette of the Son-Granting Guanyin (Songzi Guanyin). Unpainted porcelain, Dehua, second half of the seventeenth century. © Porzellan-
sammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlung-en Dresden. Photograph: Werner Lieberknecht, Dresden, 2008.](image-url)
narrated how the inhabitants of Shaozhou conferred the honorary title “Our Lady, the Holy Mother” (Shengmu Niangniang) on the Holy Mother, a common honorary title for many Chinese female deities, but one not usually used by missionaries to name the Christian Mother of God.\(^{31}\)

The foregoing account suggests that the Holy Virgin was appropriated as a son-granting deity by Chinese women through a spontaneous process of cultural hybridization, rather than through a deliberate transfer by the Jesuits. There is some evidence, however, that the latter, despite their general rejection of popular Buddhism, actively supported Mary’s metamorphosis into some form of Christian Guanyin. Alfonso Vagnone’s *Biography of the Holy Mother* (Shengmu xingshi, 1631), in particular, contained a ten-page-long subchapter titled “The Holy Mother Helps Those Who Give Birth” (Shengmu hu shengchanzhe).\(^{32}\) The main aim of the subchapter was to prove the Holy Mother’s “efficacy” (*ling*) and “tremendous power” (*dali*) of granting sons in cases of infertility. Four of its six miracle tales were dedicated to this subject, the other two relating to an intercession during a difficult delivery and the resurrection of a stillborn infant.\(^{33}\) Vagnone’s insistence on the Virgin Mary’s child-granting power is particularly surprising in view of how this facet of Marian devotion, even if it was present in medieval European miracle tales, was of no particular importance in seventeenth-century European Marian devotion. This suggests that, by emphasizing it, Vagnone was responding to a Chinese religious demand, rather than transporting European devotional practices to China.\(^{34}\)

Despite adapting the Virgin Mary to the Chinese religious landscape, Vagnone nevertheless ensured that she remained recognizably part of the Christian tradition. He did so by linking Mary’s child-granting quality with her own maternity, a fact intrinsically connected with a key element of the Christian doctrine: the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ. According to Vagnone, “The grace by which the Lord of Heaven descended to Earth is now entrusted to the Holy Mother, who bestows it to women who are pregnant.”\(^{35}\) Furthermore, Vagnone mentioned that relics of the Nativity, such as the Infant Jesus’s swaddling clothes in Milan, could be used by “whoever met with difficulties during childbearing.”\(^{36}\) By linking Mary’s son-granting power to her own miraculous pregnancy and delivery, Vagnone made sure that the Christian doctrine was made known to son-seeking women who sought her divine intercession. Simultaneously, he also opened up possibilities for an alternative reading of João da Rocha’s *Rules for Reciting the Rosary* (Song nianzhu guicheng, 1619), which prominently displayed pictures of the Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity.
These pictures, which were modeled upon the engravings published in Jerónimo Nadal’s *Images of the Story of the Gospel* (Evangelicae Historiae Imagines, 1593), were strongly adapted to Chinese visual conventions, with the Annunciation showing a fully Sinified Mary praying in a Chinese studio when conceiving her son by mediation of the Holy Spirit (figure 5.3).37 This picture forcefully invoked Mary’s motherhood for the minds of Chinese female devotees, and it probably also reminded them of the Holy Virgin’s child-granting powers, on which they could rely.

Vagnone’s *Biography of the Holy Mother* thus points to the Jesuits’ active participation in the transformation of the Holy Mother into a Chinese son-granting deity. But it also tells about the devotions that Jesuits recommended to Chinese son-seeking women. Vagnone advised them to address the Holy Mother in regular prayer. He explained that people had their wishes for heirs granted after they “piously revered the Holy Mother at regular times” or after they “prayed to the Lord of Heaven and the Holy Mother every day and asked them to compassionately grant them [a son].”

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**Fig. 5.3.** Annunciation scene showing Mary praying in a Chinese elite woman’s studio. A sewing basket is placed behind her and to her left. Woodblock print from João da Rocha’s *Rules for Reciting the Rosary* (1619). Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program.
Furthermore, Vagnone promoted the taking of vows as an effective means for obtaining the Holy Mother’s help (a concept known equally to European Tridentine and Chinese religious cultures). All these suggestions fitted well with traditional Chinese fertility devotions, where different forms of invocation and the taking of vows played a predominant role.

Although it is probable that the Virgin Mary’s female gender contributed to her acceptance as a child-granting deity, acting as the divine protector of reproducing women was not the prerogative of female “deities.” Indeed, the Jesuits’ annual letters portray divine protection of parturient women as the domain of a male saint, St. Ignatius of Loyola. In what follows I investigate the ascent of St. Ignatius as a protector of birthing women in China and compare Ignatian devotions connected with childbirth to Marian devotions connected with conception.

**POWERFUL IMAGES ON LABORING BODIES**

St. Ignatius’s help for parturient women was usually mediated through powerful objects (*sacramentalia*), especially names (*nomina*) and images (*imagines*). These were mostly strips of paper printed with the saint’s name or picture and consecrated by a priest. Medals made of more lasting materials, such as metal or wood, are also mentioned by the sources, and, in some rare cases involving court Jesuits, precious relics of St. Ignatius were also used. The sacramentals and relics were usually fixed on a string and hung around the neck of parturient women, who were encouraged to pray wholeheartedly to the saint and trust in his power. Intercessions of St. Ignatius during difficult delivery were recorded in numerous annual letters. Furthermore, single annual letters sometimes recorded a great number of cases of successful interventions by St. Ignatius. The Annual Letter of 1633 alone, for instance, reports three such successful intercessions during three cases of difficult childbirth in Shanxi, in addition to an unspecified number of successful intercessions in Fujian. In view of this, it is reasonable to suggest that, while other powerful objects of the Catholic tradition (consecrated candles, branches, holy water, Agnus Dei, and the image of the Savior) were also occasionally used during difficult childbirths, the Ignatian sacramentals were by far the most popular objects for this purpose.

In contrast to the worship of the Virgin Mary as a fertility deity, the use of Ignatian sacramentals as birth amulets was not a singular development in Chinese Catholicism, but had its origin in Europe. From the early years of the seventeenth century, European Jesuits had started to propagate their
patron saint as a powerful intermediary in the event of difficult deliveries.\textsuperscript{47} Just like the missionaries in China, the European Jesuits advised parturient women to wear an amulet of the saint around their neck and to address the saint in fervent prayer. A highly developed Ignatian devotion practiced by pregnant women evolved in many regions of seventeenth-century Europe. Parturient women made use of a variety of sacramentals such as Ignatian signatures, girdles, and images, and pregnant women drank “water of St. Ignatius” previously blessed by a priest.\textsuperscript{48} By propagating their founding father as a protector of parturient women, the Jesuits in China therefore were not reacting to a preexisting Chinese cult but rather were expanding the geographical scope of an originally European Catholic devotion.

That the latter found broad acceptance among Chinese women was apparently connected with the way Catholic sacramentals worked. Just like many powerful objects used by devotees of Chinese popular religion, sacramentals were freely accessible to believers and could be used without priestly assistance.\textsuperscript{49} They could be easily integrated into late imperial folk medical culture, in which people customarily had recourse to relics and other powerful objects that provided spiritual assistance against illness, misfortune, or natural hazards.\textsuperscript{50} In particular, the \textit{nomina} and \textit{imagines} distributed by the Jesuits to parturient women conspicuously resembled indigenous written charms (\textit{fu}), which were esoteric characters inscribed on paper and pasted on a wall of the birth chamber or swallowed by the birthing mother.\textsuperscript{51} It is probable that the Jesuits aimed at replacing such “idolatrous” practices when introducing Ignatian sacramentals in China, just as their brethren tried to replace non-Christian, “magical” birth amulets with Catholic sacramentals in contemporary Europe.\textsuperscript{52} They not only testify to the dissemination of post-Tridentine religious culture on a global scale but also demonstrate the high capacity of Chinese popular religion to integrate novel practices into its “tool kit.”\textsuperscript{53}

How did the practice of using Ignatian sacramentals during difficult deliveries spread across Chinese Catholic networks? Unlike the Virgin Mary, St. Ignatius was not particularly vigorously promoted as a protector of reproducing women by the Jesuits’ writings. In the \textit{Biography of St. Ignatius} (Sheng Yinajue zhuan, 1629) Alfonso Vagnone made only brief reference to the saint’s efficacy in helping “women who meet with difficult delivery” (\textit{nü zao chan nan}) and did not use miracle stories to help illustrate this power.\textsuperscript{54} This suggests that, rather than the written record, oral transmission played a major role in the spread of Ignatian sacramentals.
Furthermore, since childbirth was virtually an exclusively female domain in late imperial China, it is reasonable to suggest that word of St. Ignatius’s protecting power spread mainly through female networks.\textsuperscript{55}

The way in which the use of Ignatian sacramentals spread within female networks by word of mouth is aptly illustrated by a story reported in the Annual Letter of 1619. It recounts how a Catholic woman in Hangzhou helped her non-Catholic neighbor during a dangerous delivery. When she learned that her neighbor had been in heavy labor for several days and her life was in danger, she carried the image of St. Ignatius to this neighbor’s home. The Catholic woman had herself previously experienced the power of the image during childbirth, and she therefore knew how to put it to use. After entering the birth chamber, she first readjusted the room’s furnishings, removing the pictures of non-Christian deities. She then helped her neighbor to affix the image on her laboring body. When everything was in place, the Catholic woman started to invoke the names of Jesus, Mary, and St. Ignatius. After a short while, her neighbor suddenly delivered her baby. Thanks to the Ignatian sacramental, the story concludes, “the same person who had previously been cruelly tormented and had seen her death approaching rose from her bed after three days and took up her work.”\textsuperscript{56}

The story of the Hangzhou birth miracle shows how women, both relatives and neighbors, shared their best practices with one another during childbirth, without paying much attention to religious affiliation. That it was included in an annual letter suggests that the Jesuits approved of this practice—because, certainly, they hoped that the use of Catholic objects by non-Catholics might lead them to convert.\textsuperscript{57}

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A focus on reproducing women’s appropriation of efficacy-based Catholic religiosity shows that Chinese female devotees, far from perceiving Catholicism as an unchangeable, monolithic block, adopted isolated Catholic practices according to their specific individual needs. By adapting these practices to the Chinese cultural context, they divested them of their confessional character and transformed them so that they functioned according to the logics of Chinese efficacy-based religiosity.

Catholic sacramentals responded well to the needs of Chinese female devotees, for several reasons. They could be revered individually, without the assistance of a religious specialist, either in a church or at home, and they circulated freely beyond the threshold of the inner quarters. They
could attain multiple meanings in the course of this circulation and therefore could be adapted well to different needs and into different belief contexts. The sacramentals used by son-seeking and pregnant women were linked to the Chinese religious landscape and to post-Tridentine Catholic religiosity in highly variable ways. While the worship of the Virgin Mary by son-seeking women was a development specific to the Sino-Western cultural encounter, the use of Ignatian sacramentals during delivery was tightly connected with a post-Tridentine cult promoted by the Jesuits in Europe. The promotion of the respective cults relied, furthermore, on different media. While the Jesuits actively supported the transformation of the Virgin Mary into a child-granting deity in their *Biography of the Holy Mother*, written text apparently played a less important role in the spread of Ignatian sacramentals.

Individually practiced, efficacy-based religiosity was, of course, not the only modality by which Chinese devotees made use of Catholic religious practices. To the contrary, many women also clearly identified themselves as Christians and had higher spiritual aspirations than occasional recourse to the Catholic spiritual remedies that were on offer in the vast Chinese religious market. For these women’s devotional lives, Catholic congregations—groups with a certain degree of institutionalization and a comparably clear definition of confessional boundaries—were usually the focal point.