DOMESTIC COMMUNITIES

Women’s Congregations and Communal Piety

Chinese Catholic communities were conceptualized by missionaries and Chinese Catholics in different ways. While missionaries generally used the term *christianitas* to designate the totality of Catholics living in a certain place (a notion inspired by the concept of the post-Tridentine parish), Chinese Catholics usually perceived of the religious congregation (*hui*) as their ritual community. Congregations aimed at organizing and nurturing people’s communal lay piety, especially in the missionaries’ absence. They were usually subjected to statutes (*huigui*), in which their spiritual father determined terms of admission, internal organization, and devotional routine. Many of them were modeled upon the Jesuits’ Marian congregations in Europe. Although congregations could vary considerably in scale—some resembled European sodalities, whereas others seem to have been rather open devotional groups that were used by the missionaries “to organize and administer the larger group of people in the area”—congregations were, generally speaking, highly localized bodies. Several congregations could be found in larger cities, where the Catholics of different neighborhoods organized their own devotional groups. This “fragmented system of church organization” had the advantage of diminishing the visibility of Catholic communal worship while granting all Catholics frequent access to communal devotion. Given the congregations’ preeminence as “communities of effective rituals,” the totality of Catholics living in a certain place hardly ever assembled as a group. Although well-instructed Chinese Catholics were probably aware that their congregation was part of a larger religious institution, their community of worship was usually a strictly local, and often rather small, religious congregation.

Introducing a gender perspective into research on Chinese Catholic communities leads us to the important insight that, as well as being heavily localized organizations, these communities were also strictly homosocial.
Although connections between men’s and women’s congregations existed—missionaries reported that men and women closely watched each other’s pious activities and often entered into “holy competition” with each other⁷—Catholic men and women only rarely met jointly for religious worship, but they engaged in separate communal pious activities.

Which Chinese models influenced the organization of Catholic women’s congregations? Which devotions did these groups practice, and who were the women responsible for their organization? And, finally, what role did church-based, priestly rituals play for their devotional lives?

**AN UNCANNY LIKENESS: BUDDHIST AND CATHOLIC WOMEN’S CONGREGATIONS**

Chinese models were important for the great success of the Jesuits’ introduction of congregations in China, as they were embedded into a rich landscape of Chinese common-interest groups ranging from erudite societies attached to semiprivate academies (*shuyuan*) to different kinds of “cultural groups” (*wenshe*) dedicated to the arts and from “societies for sharing pleasure” (*tonglehui*) to “benevolent societies” (*tongshanhui*) created for the purpose of helping the poor.⁸ However, it is noteworthy that all these associations, with the exception of a few poetry clubs frequented or formed by gentry women, were a predominantly male domain.⁹ Therefore, unlike Chinese Catholic men’s congregations, which were often inspired by the model of non-Catholic charitable societies, women’s congregations probably did not draw inspiration from these common-interest groups.¹⁰ Rather, they likely used non-Catholic religious associations, the only associations commonly created and frequented by women, as models for their congregations.

Lay Buddhist congregations for women emerged in particularly great numbers during the Buddhist renewal in the late Ming period.¹¹ Women gathered in Buddhist “societies for reciting the Buddha’s name” (*nianfo hui*), organized “sutra chanting societies” (*songjing hui*), and established groups for the purpose of receiving the teachings of local nuns and monks. Still highly popular among middle-aged women in China today, these groups were not usually characterized by a strict confessional identity, but were organizations that provided the especially devout with opportunities for communal worship and spiritual sustenance.¹² Simultaneously, these groups often organized temple visits and pilgrimages, granting women an exceptional degree of extra-domestic autonomy and opportunities for social amusement.¹³
Chinese women’s penchant for lay Buddhist practices was noticed by the Jesuits, who perceived Buddhism as a powerful rival in the Chinese market of religion. They repeatedly mentioned in their writings that women converting to Catholicism had previously been Buddhist followers. As a case in point, Manuel Dias the Younger remarked in 1628 that a woman who had received baptism in the city of Ningbo had previously been a devotee “of the idol that they call Guanyin pusa,” and João Monteiro mentioned the conversion of a woman who had previously worshipped the Amida Buddha. The missionaries’ writings also contain numerous references to Chinese women’s penchant for lay Buddhist practices. Missionaries complained about women’s inclination toward vegetarian fasts (a practice often inspired by the Buddhist precept of non-killing), and they commented on Chinese women’s love for reciting the Buddha’s name (nianfo). They explained that many Chinese women made close contact with monks and were so heavily involved with “paganism” (grandes pagodentas) that it was difficult to win them to Christianity even if their husbands and sons had already converted. Unfortunately, they do not describe the latter’s organization in detail, but merely mention their regular meetings and the vegetarian diet observed by their members.

Although the Jesuits harbored resentment toward Chinese women’s involvement with Buddhism, they nevertheless profited from it in curious ways. This is shown by the fact that women’s “congregations of idols” occasionally converted to Catholicism as groups. Several examples of this noteworthy phenomenon are recorded in annual letters. The Annual Letter of 1642, for instance, narrates how a Buddhist congregation in Huai’an converted to Catholicism. It had started with the conversion of a noble lady of the city, who had been the founder and head of the “pagan” women’s congregation, which was dedicated to the worship of one certain “idol.” The woman, who was christened Monica, wished to “turn away from the idols and to direct toward Christ those spirits whom she herself had induced to join the impious congregation.”

When the congregation assembled in a temple to offer sacrifices to their deity, Monica joined the group and tried to persuade them to become Christians. When they did not listen to her, she wholeheartedly asked God to reveal to them the diabolic nature of their cult. Her prayers were heard, for “they had an oven full of ember in which they threw incense and slips of paper with superstitious vows and prayers written on them. . . . However,
[the slips] did not catch fire, and [the incense] did not emit any fragrance. Rather, everything remained uncorrupted by the fire. In the view of this miracle, the women stood in great stupefaction.” When Monica took advantage of the situation and again enjoined them to abdicate the “cult of the demons,” the women were finally convinced and wanted to embrace Catholicism. Monica thereupon “acted as their catechist, instructed them in the mysteries of the faith, and imbued them with the notice of the divine matters.”21 The women were baptized during the Italian Jesuit Francesco Sambiasi’s next stay in Huai’an, and Monica became the spiritual leader of the group, which was formalized using a Catholic congregational rule and put under the protection of the Holy Virgin. Similar events were recorded by missionaries in Hangzhou (1645) and Xi’an (1647).22 In the latter case, the newly converted women redirected their alms, which were previously collected for the purpose of sustaining a monk, toward poor Catholics and the church.23

Although the transformation from Buddhist to Catholic women’s congregations remained a rather marginal phenomenon that gained momentum only during the crisis-ridden years preceding and following the fall of the Ming dynasty, it nevertheless points to curious “elective affinities” between Buddhist and Catholic congregations.24 Indeed, a comparison of the two types of organizations shows that some conspicuous similarities existed between them. They were both led by female lay leaders, and their activities consisted mainly of regular meetings during which the group engaged in common prayer, pious discussion, and simple ritual acts.25 Unlike the domestic meetings of Catholic women, Buddhist women’s congregational meetings were not necessarily held in private houses, but could also take place in temples.26 The similarities, however, probably prompted Chinese women to regard the difference between Catholic and Buddhist congregations as a “difference of degree rather than kind.”27 That the Jesuits agreed on transforming congregations from Buddhist into Catholic organizations without altering their internal structure suggests that they found these similarities useful rather than troubling.

LAY DEVOTIONS AND FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Unlike for men, no statutes of women’s congregations have come down to us. We therefore have to resort to the Jesuits’ annual letters to reconstruct these congregations’ organizational and devotional patterns. These sources reveal that women’s congregations were generally of a domestic nature.
They usually assembled in “particular” (i.e., residential) houses for regular gatherings, often in the absence of a priest. Yet annual letters show that most women’s congregations were not purely “domestic congregations” in the sense of consisting only of the members of one single household. Rather, although a single congregational group usually had a fixed meeting place in one particular house oratory, most of them were frequented by women of several different households, thus forming what might be called an “extended domestic congregation.”

First mentioned by the Jesuits in the 1600s, extended domestic congregations seem to have gained special momentum during the 1630s, when conversions to Catholicism increased considerably. The Annual Letter of 1692 testifies to how they remained important throughout the seventeenth century, explaining that the Catholic women of Beijing were still organized in congregations led by “women who invite[d] their female relatives and neighbors” for joint worship in their homes. Women’s extended domestic congregations were probably a predominantly urban phenomenon, gender segregation being somewhat less insisted upon in rural China, where Catholic men and women sometimes also assembled in one large mixed congregation.

Extended domestic congregations were usually headed by the senior lady of the hosting family. These congregational leaders were referred to in the missionaries’ writings in Latin as superiorae and in Portuguese as majordomos; their Chinese form of address was probably huizhang (”heads of the group,” a term used for male congregational leaders). According to the Annual Letter of 1607, they were in charge of organizing the congregation’s meetings, convoking its members for sermons and religious instruction. Furthermore, they oversaw the admission of new members, collecting and destroying the latter’s “idols”—that is, non-Catholic images, statues, and devotional objects—upon their entry into the group. They were also responsible for the maintenance of the oratory, “just like sacristans,” as Matteo Ricci noted in his diary. Finally, later annual letters contain evidence that congregational leaders figured as a link between the missionary and the female Christian flock, arranging meetings with the priests where women received the sacraments.

Annual letters contended that the heads of women’s congregations—preferably middle-aged and elderly women, whose religious activities were broadly accepted in late imperial China—were usually of noble origin. This claim is supported by the fact that their house oratories had to be spacious enough to host comparably large groups of women and that
congregational leaders were often singled out for their generous charity toward poor Catholics.38 Source evidence shows, however, that the female leaders of extended domestic congregations were usually not members of the upper echelon of the literati elite. Such women preferred to gather in strictly domestic congregations, rather than in general congregations that admitted women of other families to meetings (see chapter 7). It is therefore probable that most female leaders of women’s extended domestic congregations were members of literati families who had never entered the ranks of the office-holding gentry because their male members had failed to earn a degree in imperial examinations. This assumption is supported by the fact that the milieu of local intellectual and community leaders was a group that responded especially well to the Jesuits’ evangelization.39

While congregational leaders were generally members of wealthy families, the social composition of congregations seems to have varied. Some female congregational leaders—especially, it is likely, those of comparably high social standing—attached great importance to the social homogeneity of their groups of devotees and invited only women of the same social standing to their meetings.40 In other cases, however, female congregational leaders also invited Catholic women of lesser social standing to join their congregation, some even admitting women from the surrounding villages to their gatherings.41 These congregations were usually referred to in annual letters as “universal congregations.”42

Although women’s congregations also involved pious activities such as penance and charity to the sick, the dying, and the poor, congregational meetings were organized mainly for the purpose of joint prayer. During regular prayer sessions, women joined in chanting the litanies and other prayers recorded in the Chinese prayer books of the Jesuits, a preferred prayer of many women’s congregations being the Rosary.43 The missionaries often praised women for the great zeal with which they attended these meetings. They suggested that women were in many places more fervent participants in congregations than men were.44 Although statistical data supporting this statement are lacking, it fits well with the “division of religious labor” in late imperial Chinese society, which saw women as responsible for most religious activities, with men primarily responsible only for infrequent, larger community rituals.45

The Annual Letter of 1634 includes a description of the weekly celebration of the “Day of the Lord” by a women’s congregation in Xi’an, vividly recording the solemnity with which women’s congregations usually
conducted their prayer meetings. As recounted in the letter: “[The women] meet every Sunday in a beautiful hall and erect an altar, on which they place the images of the Lord and the Virgin [adorned] with many candles and incense, and they rival each other with their donations with which they pay the expenses.”

Images, candles, and incense assimilated the sensory religious experience of these meetings to rituals held in Catholic churches and Chinese temples, which both had similar appeal.

The meetings allowed the devout to worship together, but they also provided opportunities for non-Catholics to become acquainted with the “teachings of the Lord of Heaven.” Several sources mention that non-Catholic relatives and friends were actively invited to attend the congregations to incite their interest in Catholicism. This strategy seems to have been rather successful. Annual letters reported that many women sought baptism after obtaining religious instruction in a congregation, without ever having met a priest prior to conversion.

In addition to non-Catholic friends, small children were also brought along to congregational meetings by their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers. Since this presence ensured the intergenerational transmission of Catholic knowledge, missionaries generally approved of this practice.

While attendance at congregational meetings constituted the main obligation for members of a Chinese Catholic women’s congregation, missionaries also tried to encourage fervor in everyday life. For this purpose, they created a second group of lay leaders: female catechists (probably jiaozhang in Chinese).

Unlike the sedentary congregational leaders, catechists were usually itinerant. They saw the congregation’s members for religious instruction during visits to their homes, where they propagated the “teachings of the Lord of Heaven” among Catholic and non-Catholic women.

Some of them became highly influential local religious leaders. Martino Martini mentioned in the Annual Letter of 1644 that the women of Changzhou were instructed by a certain catechist named Agatha: “[She] may rightly be called the apostle of this place, because all women are instructed by her and obey her orders. They continually invite her to visit their houses in order to talk about God and to perform their devotions.”

In the absence of any source references, it is unclear whether (and rather improbable that) female catechists were, like their male counterparts, organized in special congregations for catechists. We know, however, that at least some of them received remuneration for their work—either from the missionaries or from influential local Catholics, such as the eminent gentry lady Candida
Furthermore, source evidence suggests that an increasingly dense network of catechists evolved during the seventeenth century. The Annual Letter of 1697 thus reported that the missionaries in Beijing assigned a catechist to each women’s congregation, entrusting them with the religious instruction of both Catholics and non-Catholics and expecting them to report back about their work.55

Despite increasingly close links between catechists and missionaries, female catechists did not always correspond to the image of European Catholic lay catechists such as the semireligious dévotes, who dominated women’s religious instruction in contemporary France. While the latter were usually characterized by an elevated social standing and a strong interiorization of Tridentine religiosity, the itinerant nature of Chinese catechists’ work entailed that most of them were of comparably humble social background.56 Some of them even seem to have been influenced by indigenous religious role models such as shamanesses (wu) or spirit mediums (tongji).57 This is illustrated by the story of Martha, a woman who worked as a catechist in the surroundings of Xi’an during the late 1630s. According to the Annual Letter of 1638, Martha had been cruelly tormented by “demons” for a long time before her husband summoned the Jesuits in 1638. The demons had been taking possession of the woman with great frequency, speaking through her and making her lose her mental faculties. After a two-week exorcism administered by the Jesuits, Martha was freed from thirty-two demons and became a fervent Christian. As a catechist, she converted some dozen people from her village. Her success was probably connected to the fact that her ties to the spiritual world were not severed after conversion. According to the annual letters, several miracles happened in Martha’s proximity, such as holy signs appearing on her garments and idolatrous statues spontaneously shattering into pieces in her presence.58

We know that in eighteenth-century Fujian a great number of different offices were held by lay people from Catholic communities administered by Spanish Dominican friars. Lay people acted not only as congregational leaders and catechists but also as sacristans (tangzhu), heads of sacristans (zongtang[zh])ü), and prayer leaders (niantou).59 In view of the differentiated organizational structure of the Fujian communities, it is reasonable to assume that the two lay offices described above were only a part of a more intricate lay hierarchy whose complete structure the missionaries do not describe in detail. Nevertheless, the Jesuits’ reports point to the preeminent importance of female lay leaders for the functioning of women’s congregations’ devotional activities.
PRIESTLY RITUALS AS INSTANCES OF INTENSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

What was the place of church-based, priestly rituals in the devotional routine of women’s congregations? In view of the importance of lay leadership and lay devotions for the congregations, it is not surprising that church visits and the reception of sacraments they involved were not part of congregations’ day-to-day activities. The frequency with which church visits were organized varied, however, from place to place. While some urban women’s congregations (such as those of Canton during the 1690s) received the sacraments every other week, congregations in small towns or cities without a resident missionary met priests only every few months or even less frequently. Whenever possible, missionaries invited women’s congregations to major church festivals. As a consequence, these occasions attracted the greatest number of women to churches. Francesco Brancati explained in 1658 that virtually all Catholic women, even villagers, visited the women’s church of Shanghai during Advent and Lent, and Inácio da Costa noted in 1647 that some hundred Catholic women usually visited the church in Xi’an on Christmas to hear Mass and adore the Infant Jesus. To prevent crowds of women from assembling in church, missionaries invited different congregations on different days before and after the feast day. Special days for church visits were also assigned to village women coming from the surrounding countryside. Women occasionally also celebrated Chinese feast days in church. These festivals, “on which the heathen use[d] to go to their temples,” probably included the Lantern Festival (Yuanxiao Jie), celebrated fifteen days after the Chinese New Year, and the Tomb Sweeping Festival (Qingming Jie), which took place fifteen days after the spring equinox. At least in the later years of the seventeenth century, the organization of church visits usually fell to the female lay leaders of the congregation, who functioned as links between the congregation and the missionary. This is illustrated by an annual letter dating from the early 1690s. It related how the women’s congregations of Beijing usually gathered in private houses for lay-led prayer and visited the women’s church for the administration of sacraments on a few days throughout the year, the exact dates communicated to their majordomo.

That Catholic women were eager to receive the sacraments at least on major feast days shows that these church-based rituals, although only rarely administered, helped define their Catholic identity nevertheless. Edifying stories recorded by the Jesuits support this assumption. The Annual Letter of 1694, for instance, contains the story of a Catholic commoner woman
who was married to a non-Catholic husband and who went to great lengths to receive the sacraments despite her husband’s prohibitions. 

Philippe Couplet also noted that Candida Xu, the eminent granddaughter of the Catholic scholar-official Xu Guangqi, never missed an occasion to receive the sacraments. Not even the harshest weather conditions would persuade her to stay at home. Although such stories tended to be strongly idealized, they nevertheless suggest that church-based priestly rituals might be best understood as comparably rare but highly meaningful moments of intense religious experience, moments cherished by devout Catholic women.

For most Catholic women, their congregation’s communal church visits were the only occasions on which they would meet a missionary. However, we should not think of these gatherings as occasions for intimate contact between priests and female devotees. Missionaries were advised to pay careful attention to the maintenance of decorum. In some places, they kept their faces constantly turned toward the altar, even during the sermon. During confession, meanwhile, a curtain or folding screen would separate the priest from the female penitent. This practice anticipated the use of the confessional, still in its initial phase in many places in seventeenth-century Europe.

While the administration of sacraments was an important object of theological debate between the Jesuits and the Roman Curia (see chapter 3), not much is known about Chinese Catholic women’s attitudes toward the sacraments. What can be said, however, is that of all those sacraments administered to Catholics on a regular basis, confession played an outstanding role.

The Jesuits repeatedly referred to the great numbers of women’s confessions, easily outnumbering men’s confessions. The French Jesuit Louis Le Comte, who stayed in China from 1688 to 1691, held that Chinese Catholic women “would have been happy to confess every day if they had had the liberty to do so.” According to Le Comte, Chinese women often confessed their sins in painstaking detail. He added that he did not know “whether this [was] because of their tender conscience, their esteem for the sacrament, or for another reason.” There is evidence that Catholic women perceived confession as the ritual distinguishing their ritual communities from other, non-Catholic ones. In 1662, for example, Prospero Intorcetta reported that a Catholic woman in Jianchang joined a Buddhist congregation when her husband prohibited her from receiving confession in church. The woman returned to the Catholic community only when her husband died, enabling her to once again receive the sacrament of confession on a regular basis.
In Chinese Catholicism, attachment to confession was not a specifically female phenomenon. As pointed out by the authors of a recent volume on Chinese Catholic confessions, the sacrament of penance can be regarded as the most important ritual of Chinese Catholicism as a whole. Liturgical as well as doctrinal reasons account for this fact. From a liturgical viewpoint, confession was, in contrast to the more exclusive sacrament of the Eucharist, accessible to all baptized Catholics. It was, indeed, a precondition for admission to it, further enhancing its importance. From a doctrinal viewpoint, the special attention that Chinese Catholics paid to the concept of divine retribution accounts for the central importance they attached to confession. Chinese Catholic writings point to the centrality of the idea of an omnipotent Lord of Heaven who rewards and punishes all souls. In combination with a strong awareness of sin, this monotheistic belief resulted in a special position for the ritual of “confession-and-absolution” (gaojie). This was further enhanced by a cultural context in which self-examination played an outstanding role and in which people were deeply aware of men's inclination to evil.

What were the reasons for women's extraordinarily strong inclination toward confession, surpassing, according to the missionaries, even men's love for this ritual? It is probable that their traditionally strong engagement with individual piety, and more specifically their special penchant for practices of spiritual purification, accounts for this preference. Since Chinese women were traditionally more deeply involved in Buddhist practices than men were, they were also more concerned with the Buddhist concept of karmic retribution. This held that evil deeds (zuiye) invariably affected a person's rebirth in a negative way, while meritorious deeds had positive effects on rebirth. Chinese women were also keen practitioners of Taoist “inner alchemy” (neidan), which aimed at spiritual purification in order to attain immortality. Female adepts of Buddhist and Taoist practices were especially concerned about cleansing themselves from the polluting effects of childbearing, which, according to popular Buddhist belief, could result in a woman's rebirth in an abominable blood-pond hell.

That many women converting to Catholicism had previously incorporated non-Catholic concepts of pollution and divine retribution into their personal beliefs is made clear by numerous sources written by the Jesuits. The innumerable cases of women practicing vegetarianism, either as part of a quest for Taoist immortality or for Buddhist moral perfection, have already been mentioned above. The missionaries also described women...
who felt utterly relieved when hearing that Catholics rejected karmic retribution. The Annual Letter of 1642, for instance, noted that a woman converted as soon as she heard that Catholics did not believe in transmigration. In 1614, in the same vein, Francesco Sambiasi narrated the conversion of a woman who was happy to hear that Catholic women did not risk rebirth in the Buddhist blood-pond hell.

Since spiritual purification was traditionally a concern reserved for middle-aged and elderly women, it is not surprising that Catholic penitential practices were especially appealing to older Chinese women. An annual letter covering the early 1640s, for example, mentions one particular penitential group (kuhui) for elderly women who wanted to prepare themselves for death and who engaged, accordingly, in harsh penitential practices, including fasts and the wearing of cilices.

While many Chinese Catholic women were probably interested in the benefits of confession as a ritual of spiritual purification, it is unlikely that women always perceived of confession as a tool for moral perfection. On the one hand, there seem to have been many women who, through daily examinations of conscience and harsh penitential practices, succeeded in embodying the model penitent moved to “sorrowful repentance” (tonghui) that the Jesuits evoked in their prescriptive texts. On the other hand, others were probably interested more in receiving the priest’s absolution for their sins than in pursuing a quest for spiritual progress. Regardless of their inner disposition, however, Catholic women generally seem to have perceived the ritual of confession, and the church visits during which it was performed, as opportunities for individual as well as communal redemption. This was because confession fostered, albeit via highly individualized ritual, a strong sense of community.

Liam M. Brockey, in his book on the Jesuits’ seventeenth-century mission to China, maintains that mission stations and churches were the actual centers of gravity in Chinese Catholic communities. Taking the Hangzhou church as an example, he shows that churches were places where whole communities as well as small devotional groups—penitential, Marian, and charitable—gathered for worship. If we look at Chinese Catholicism from a gender perspective, it becomes evident that the bustling religious life of Catholic churches principally reflects the male aspect of
Chinese Catholic communal religiosity. Rather than being oriented toward churches, women’s communal religiosity was predominantly domestic, with the house oratory as its center of gravity. Due to their domestic nature, Chinese Catholic women’s communities differed from men’s communities in two ways.

First, with regard to their internal organization, women’s congregations were more tightly connected with particular Catholic families than men’s congregations were. While the latter chose their congregational head in an annual election, women’s groups were generally headed by the senior lady of the hosting family over a long period. These women were endowed with considerable power, deciding, for instance, about who was admitted to the group. Since they were often reported to have invited neighbors and relatives, it is probable that family and neighborhood networks played a more important role in women’s congregations than in men’s.

The second difference between men’s and women’s congregations concerns the religious purposes for which they were founded. Men’s congregations were formed for two different purposes. General congregations were established for the simple purpose of Catholics’ regular communal worship, while more exclusive devotional confraternities were established for specific religious purposes, such as penitence, charity, or prayer. The situation was different for women. Devotional sororities, which would have required close supervision by the priest, were only rarely formed (the Xi’an penitential group for elderly women mentioned above was a noteworthy exception). In some rare cases, women were admitted to devotional congregations formed for men, but only under the condition that they practice their devotions at home rather than with the group. Most women, however, organized the totality of their devotions within the ambit of their general congregations, rather than form particular groups for this purpose. The effects of this less differentiated organization of women’s collective piety were twofold. On the one hand, it resulted in a situation in which women’s opportunities to participate in community-based Catholic activities supervised by a priest were much less frequent than men’s. On the other hand, it conferred considerable power on female lay leaders. Due to the Jesuits’ reservations about close supervision of women’s devotional groups, lay leaders were responsible for most female communal piety. As a consequence, although occasional priestly rituals were crucial for Catholic women’s identities, congregational organization nevertheless strongly resembled the devotional autonomy of indigenous Buddhist groups.
Sources on Chinese Catholic gentry women—whose religious activities are far better documented than the activities of Catholic women of lower social strata—also support the hypothesis that the absence of a strong priestly presence provided women with considerable agency and religious autonomy. Such facets of these women’s Catholic religiosity are examined in the following chapter, which focuses on the women of a particularly well-documented family: the Xus of Shanghai.