Unlike in contemporary Catholic Europe, where religious women’s nunneries thrived, Chinese communities administered by the Jesuits were not characterized by the emergence of institutions for women who had taken a religious vow of chastity. This absence of religiously vowed chaste women distinguished the situation of Catholic communities administered by the Jesuits during the seventeenth century from the very different situation of communities administered by Dominican friars in Fujian during the eighteenth century, which saw the emergence of a thriving “third order” for women, numbering between two and three hundred women. A noteworthy exception to the earlier pattern was the establishment, around 1630, of two Catholic “convents” for virgins and chaste widows in Nanjing and Hangzhou, on the initiative of Agnes Yang, a daughter of Yang Tingyun.

A CULTURE-STRADDLING VIRTUE?

Christian notions of virginity were largely incompatible with Confucian notions of chastity. Because emphasis on the continuation of the patrilineal descent line made Confucian thinkers perceive of marriage as an obligatory institution for every woman, the ideal of religiously motivated female virginity, which acquired enormous influence in European post-Tridentine Catholicism, was utterly incompatible with Confucian values. Unlike the Confucian ideal of widow chastity, the ideal of religiously vowed virginity—traditionally embodied in China by Buddhist nuns, held in low esteem—was not an expression of the Confucian virtue of marital fidelity. It was, therefore, perceived by Confucian literati as belonging to the obscure, potentially heterodox, realm of popular religion, an anti-pode, in their minds, to Confucian orthodoxy.
Despite these reservations, the Jesuits introduced the Christian concept of religiously vowed virginity to a Chinese audience in one of their Chinese books: the *Biographies of the Saints of the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven* (Tianzhu shengjiao shengren xingshi; in the following shortened to *Biographies of the Saints*) published by Alfonso Vagnone in 1629 (figure 8.1).\(^7\) This book contained hagiographic accounts of the lives of twenty-four women, twelve of them “chaste women” (*jiefu*), the other twelve virgins (*shoutongshen*, literally “those who keep a child’s body”).\(^8\) A short explanation was provided to illuminate the meaning of this latter category. According to Vagnone, it referred to “women with high religious aspirations [*gaozhi*] who neither marry nor sully themselves through sexual contacts for their whole lives.” Vagnone explained that such women had existed from the earliest times of Christianity and that they “diligently cultivated purity of body and

**FIG. 8.1.** Frontispiece of Alfonso Vagnone’s *Biographies of the Saints* (1629). At the center of the frontispiece is a table of contents in the form of a cross, indicating that five *juan* are dedicated to male saints (*shengren*) and two to female saints (*shengnü*). Courtesy of Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Jap. Sin. 65 I.
mind in order to attain heaven at the end of their lives.” By identifying spiritual purity rather than marital fidelity as the ultimate goal, this explanation clearly distinguished Christian female virginity from Chinese concepts of chastity. This difference was further underlined by how nine of the twelve virgins portrayed in the Biographies of the Saints were virgin martyrs, most of whom suffered martyrdom because of marriage resistance. The Jesuits thus clearly made themselves vulnerable to anti-Christian accusations of heterodoxy, praising as “holy people” (shengren) young women who had committed so grave a crime of unfiliality as resistance to marriage.

A close reading of the virgins’ biographies suggests, however, that Vagnone and his collaborators were well aware of the disruptive potential of these stories and that, wherever possible, they tried to prevent people from interpreting the virgins’ marriage resistance as a lack of filiality. This is especially aptly illustrated in the biography of St. Agnes, where Vagnone made a number of subtle, but significant, alterations in order to dispel any suspicions of a lack of filiality. Christian tradition held that Agnes, who had lived in late antiquity, was the daughter of a wealthy Roman noble family. Agnes took a vow of chastity at a young age and suffered martyrdom after she refused to marry the Roman city prefect’s son. The young girl’s marriage refusal was described by The Golden Legend (Legenda Aurea)—tentatively identified by Li Sher-shiueh as the source for the Biographies of the Saints—as follows: “When [Agnes] returned from school, the prefect’s son fell in love with her. He promised her jewels and abounding wealth if she consented to marriage. Agnes answered him: Begone from me, tinder of sin, nourishment of malefaction, fodder of death! For I have already been chosen by another lover.”

According to The Golden Legend, it was Agnes, therefore, who deliberately chose to reject her admirer’s proposal. In Vagnone’s biography of Agnes, this passage was slightly altered. In this version the parents decided not to give their daughter in marriage to the city prefect’s son:

When [Agnes] was twelve years old, the son of an official of the city heard of the holy woman’s virtue and her attractive looks and he therefore proposed marriage. Her parents refused the young man’s proposal. However, he did not give up. He waited until the woman left the house in company of her mother. He greeted her and proposed to her in person, forcing her to take the betrothal gifts. The holy woman was panic-stricken. She refused his gifts and shouted at him, saying: Stupid,
shameless fellow! Now you have seen in person that I am a chaste woman.
Alas! Alas! I have had for a long time a master whom I love and who
I follow. . . . [The Lord of Heaven] is my beloved one whom I follow. . . .
How could I abandon him in order to marry you?¹²

By letting Agnes’s parents decide about their daughter’s marriage, Vagnone made clear that the refusal of marriage by the virgin saint amounted to a fulfillment of her filial duty toward her parents, who had consented to her spiritual marriage with Jesus and, therefore, wished that their daughter become a “chaste woman.” Vagnone, indeed, even opened up the possibility of reading Agnes’s biography as the story of a “chaste martyr”—one of those Chinese women who suffered death (usually by suicide) when defending their honor against an unlawful suitor.¹³ Agnes’s filial and chaste nature was also underscored, furthermore, by how she met her suitor when she left home in the company of her mother, behavior becoming of an honorable young lady, and not when walking the streets alone.

Not all hagiographies offered themselves for adaptation to Confucian norms as Agnes’s biography did. The biography of Catherine of Siena, for instance, recounted the lengthy process by which the saintly woman convinced her parents that she was destined to serve the Lord of Heaven as a virgin. St. Catherine’s parents, determined to betroth her, were infuriated when they learned about their daughter’s resistance. When Catherine shaved her head and disfigured her face as a sign of her refusal of marriage, they ordered her to perform lowly household tasks as though she was a servant, hoping that this would break her will. Only when they found Catherine praying in her room with a white pigeon hovering above her head did they understand that their daughter enjoyed the special favor of God, and they allowed her to remain a virgin.¹⁴ In St. Catherine’s case, the struggle with her parents was an important stage of her journey toward sainthood, one that could not simply be dispensed with. As a consequence, Vagnone could not resolve the tension between the virgin’s loyalty to the Lord of Heaven and the Confucian precept of filiality, as he had for St. Agnes’s biography.

Vagnone’s biographies of St. Agnes and St. Catherine illustrate both the Jesuits’ attempts to resolve conflicts between these Christian and Confucian concepts and the impossibility of doing so completely. They point to yet another aspect of the tension inherent in the persona of the literati Jesuits, who deployed practical strategies in an attempt to mitigate this on a daily basis.
Throughout the seventeenth century, consecrated virgins remained a marginal phenomenon in the Catholic communities administered by the Jesuits. Although there is evidence that a fairly small number of virgins lived among some of Jiangnan’s most eminent Catholic gentry families (such as the Xus, discussed in the previous chapter, and the Yangs, discussed later in this chapter), the total number of recorded cases is not more than a dozen.

The few recorded cases nevertheless illustrate a resemblance between the phenomenon of consecrated virgins living under the Jesuits’ supervision and the contemporary phenomenon of beatas (consecrated virgins who do not live in a convent) that emerged under Dominican supervision in Fujian. Both the Fujianese beatas and the virgins supervised by the Jesuits usually lived with their natal families, who provided for their subsistence. As a consequence, both were overwhelmingly daughters of wealthy Catholic families, who were able to support an unmarried daughter and who seem to have perceived of a religiously vowed virgin as a source of social prestige within the local Catholic network.\(^\text{15}\) Parallels in size and development also existed between the two groups. Both groups of virgins remained comparably small during the seventeenth century. The number of beatas in Fujian only started to grow considerably during the eighteenth century.\(^\text{16}\) Although the role of virgins in the Jesuits’ eighteenth-century mission has yet to be studied in detail, it is likely that this group also grew considerably in number during this time. This is the only way we can explain the situation encountered by the Jesuits in mid-nineteenth-century Jiangnan, where virgins played a prominent role in Catholic communities.\(^\text{17}\)

Despite these similarities, there was one major difference between the Jesuits’ and the Dominicans’ promotion of virginity. In Fujian, the decision of Catholic women to embrace virginity sometimes resulted in considerable social tensions with the local community. This is shown by the case of Maria Miao, who was brought before the local magistrate by her fiancé’s family during the last years of the Ming dynasty. The plaintiffs accused Maria of turning down her parents’ long-formulated marriage plans because she desired to become a consecrated virgin.\(^\text{18}\) Another conflict erupted in Fu’an in the mid-to late 1640s, when the consecrated virgin Petronilla Chen, after being forced into marriage by her parents, stubbornly refused to consummate her marriage. Petronilla finally escaped from her groom’s home and found shelter at the Dominicans’ mission station.\(^\text{19}\) That
Maria Miao and Petronilla Chen were willing to go to great lengths to save their virginity is remarkable. It bespeaks not only the women’s deep religious vocation but also how their spiritual directors, the Dominican friars, supported them to the point of engendering conflicts with the local community over the women’s desire to embrace virginity. The situation was different in the Catholic communities administered by the Jesuits. Indeed, the Jesuits’ writings do not contain any mention of social tensions caused by a woman’s decision to embrace virginity. Evidence suggests that this was due to the different strategy adopted by the Jesuits. Unlike the Dominicans, who unconditionally supported women’s decisions to embrace virginity, the Jesuits supported aspirant virgins only if it was obvious that no social unrest would result. If a woman desired to maintain her virginity despite her family’s opposition, the Jesuits did not actively support her, but instead advised her to adopt a conciliatory attitude and to agree to marriage.

Two stories rendered in the Jesuits’ annual letters of the 1630s aptly illustrate this strategy. The first is about a fifteen-year-old maidservant named Paula, who was admitted by the Jesuits to the state of virginity in 1638. Paula was the personal servant of Cecilia, the senior lady of a Catholic literati household in a small town near Xi’an. On the occasion of a missionary’s stay with the family in 1633, Paula had converted to Catholicism. During her religious instruction, she had learned of the Christian ideal of virginity and thereafter expressed the wish to become a consecrated virgin. Paula’s wish was backed by Cecilia, who, according to the 1633 Annual Letter, loved her like a daughter and “promised to look after her for all her life, and to leave her property to her after her own death.” On All Saints’ Day in 1638, Paula took the vow of virginity in a solemn ceremony held after Mass, with Cecilia assisting as her godmother. The missionaries allowed Paula to take the vows of virginity only because her mistress’s ideological and financial support ensured that the girl’s virginal state would remain uncontested.

The protagonist of the second story is another girl named Paula, this time from the city of Fuzhou. According to the Annual Letter of 1637, Paula of Fuzhou had made “the firm decision not to marry, and not to have for her whole life another spouse than Jesus.” She had, however, already been betrothed to a gentile during her childhood. When she reached marriageable age, this man claimed his bride, and the girl’s parents decided to marry off their daughter. When Paula heard that an auspicious day had already been chosen for the wedding celebrations, she was panic-stricken. She immediately informed her spiritual father about her imminent marriage and asked him for advice. The missionary, however, did
not encourage active resistance. Rather, he counseled her to pray to the Holy Virgin Mary and to her guardian angel for help. Heeding the advice, the virgin spent eight days fasting and praying. When the wedding day approached, she confessed and received the Holy Communion. Then, during the night before the wedding celebrations, her fiancé unexpectedly died. The virgin and the Catholics rejoiced. They “understood that this was [because] of the protection granted by the Lord to his brides.”

Although it is unclear how Paula’s story would have turned out had her fiancé not died, the episode nevertheless illustrates that the Jesuits were not willing to risk confrontation by actively supporting the desire of young betrothed girls to remain virgins. Rather than risking open conflict, they hoped for divine intervention.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the Jesuits’ adoption of Confucian norms was an important explanation for their cautious approach toward the promotion of virginity in China. As shown in the previous analysis of Vagnone’s biographies of virgins, the Jesuits knew that virginity was, unlike widow chastity, not deemed honorable by Confucian literati and that their active promotion of virginity would have damaged their image as “Western literati.” However, this might not have been the only reason for the Jesuits’ reluctance to encourage the formation of a female third order in China. What probably increased their restraint was the Society of Jesus’s general attitude toward women. Imbued with Tridentine values, the Jesuits were extremely alert to the possible moral dangers that attended the task of supervising groups of virgins, perceived by the early modern Catholic Church as highly gendered and sexualized beings. From an early stage, the Society had tried to prevent its members from having close contact with women, and it had thwarted various attempts by religious communities to be accepted as female branches of the Society. This cautious approach toward religiously vowed virgins set the Jesuits apart from the Dominicans, who had a long tradition of ministry to women and of supervision of female congregations both in Europe and in the Spanish colonies.

**AGNES YANG’S DOMESTIC CONVENTS (CA. 1630–1650)**

Despite the missionaries’ reservations about the active promotion of female virginity, a group of virgins and chaste widows started to live as tertiaries—women living in semi-cloistered religious communities in accordance to a religious rule—in the city of Hangzhou around 1630. Their spiritual leader was Agnes Yang, a widowed daughter of the Catholic *jinshi* degree holder
Yang Tingyun. Agnes’s non-Catholic husband had died around 1627. He had been a wealthy man who had entertained several concubines, and he left his wife a considerable amount of property. Thanks to this property, Agnes was able to lead an economically secure life as a chaste widow and the matriarch of her late husband’s household. The position of relative power and self-determination that this status granted her, furthermore, allowed her to transform her household into a domestic convent of a sort, something resembling more “a nunnery than a house of a Mandarin,” and allowed virgins and chaste widows to live together in a life dedicated to pious practice.

The sources are rather vague about the exact composition of the group of chaste women living in Agnes’s household. Among them figured her husband’s concubines and one of her daughters, as well as “one noble lady invited by [Agnes].” The group may also have included some of Agnes’s female servants who embraced chastity. It is unclear how many chaste women actually lived in Agnes’s home. One relation written by Francisco Furtado referred to “quite a big number” of women, some of them virgins, others chaste widows. Not all of the women had formally taken vows of chastity, although some of them had.

The women lived in a separate part of Agnes’s residence. There they maintained a sumptuously decorated oratory, where they invited the missionaries on festive occasions to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments. According to the Annual Letter of 1633, the women spent their days with “different pious works and devotions.” These devotions included stern penitential practices such as prolonged fasts. The women also engaged in textile work, embroidering, in particular, precious pieces of cloth destined for religious use. The Annual Letter of 1645, furthermore, testifies to how they were engaged in the production of raw silk. It reported that Agnes Yang asked Martino Martini to bless their silkworms in the fourth lunar month of 1645, an act that may have substituted for the traditional sacrifice to the Silkworm Deity (Canshen) usually made during this period of the year.

Although the domestic convent in Hangzhou owed its existence to coincidence, Agnes apparently thought of it as a possible model for other, similar institutions. Alongside her own institution in Hangzhou, she also sponsored the establishment of a domestic convent in Nanjing, which, according to Furtado, allowed “many young women to embrace the state of consecrated virginity—an unheard thing in this kingdom.” Like Agnes’s group of chaste women in Hangzhou, the virgins of Nanjing were subjected to the
authority of a chaste widow. Rodrigo de Figueredo, with whose help the Nanjing domestic convent was established, gave the chaste women statutes inspired by the model of European female tertiaries. The Nanjing community of virgins existed for at least two decades. During the 1640s, it was administered by Francesco Sambiasi, who acted as the virgins’ spiritual adviser.

The annual letters suggest that the special religious status of the group of women living in the domestic convents of Hangzhou and Nanjing was widely acknowledged by their neighbors. They report that the chaste women’s saintly reputation was accepted by both “Christians and gentiles” and that people of all sorts wished to be included in the women’s prayers. Furthermore, they mention that some virgins became the focus of special veneration because of their saintliness. The Catholics of Nanjing, for instance, cherished the memory of one vowed virgin whose body was found without signs of decomposition in 1652, fourteen years after her death—a clear sign of a person’s sanctity in both seventeenth-century China and Europe.

Given the important role attributed to virgin saints in Catholic religious culture, and to virgin deities in Chinese popular religious culture, the veneration of the chaste women of Nanjing and Hangzhou by both Catholics and non-Catholics is not surprising. What is noteworthy, however, is that this utterly un-Confucian religious phenomenon was made possible by Agnes Yang’s realization of the Confucian ideal of widow chastity. As a chaste widow, Agnes Yang was the legitimate caretaker of her late husband’s property, providing her with substantial financial means. She was “the authority in her dead husband’s household,” which gave her great freedom of decision in domestic matters. This freedom enabled her to lead a life similar to that of those European pious widows who played a crucial role in the semireligious organizations thriving in contemporary Catholic Europe. Thanks to Agnes Yang’s intertwining of Chinese and European ideals of widowhood, the domestic convents of Nanjing and Hangzhou assumed a striking double identity. On the one hand, they were Chinese elite households led by a widowed matriarch. On the other hand, they strongly resembled European communities of tertiaries. The one minor, but important, difference was that they, in accordance with the Chinese elite’s ideal of female seclusion, probably exemplified Tridentine notions of cloistered communities to a greater extent than many European semireligious institutions. Yet, despite these remarkable similarities, the dependence of the domestic convents on the support of individual “chaste
widows” prevented them from becoming institutions that survived inter-generational transitions. It is therefore not surprising that the record of the Hangzhou and Nanjing domestic convents stops in the second half of the seventeenth century. It seems that these communities ended abruptly after the death of Agnes Yang, probably during the 1650s.

Although unique in the history of the Jesuit China mission, Agnes Yang’s use of a Confucian female role model for the pursuit of a personal religious vocation was not without precedent in late imperial China. In fact it bears some resemblance to the case of the famous religious virtuosa Tanyangzi (1558–1580), a daughter of a jinshi degree holder living in a village near Suzhou. Like Agnes Yang, Tanyangzi was the member of a highly respected family, and she did not set out primarily to challenge Confucian norms. Indeed, as a teenage girl she embraced the status of chaste maidenhood when her fiancé died prior to their wedding. However, like Agnes Yang, Tanyangzi also used the freedom provided by this Confucian ideal for her own purposes. She started to live an extremely secluded life dedicated to pious devotion to a Taoist goddess, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu). She thus became a religious virtuosa, one whose spiritual insights found many followers and whose alleged physical ascent to heaven at the point of her death in 1580 became an occasion for major religious fervor. Taken together, the stories of Agnes Yang and Tanyangzi point toward the flexibility of Confucian cultural norms in late imperial China. They show that Chinese elite women could pursue their utterly non-Confucian religious quests under the guise of Confucian womanly ideals and that such activities did not necessarily provoke repressive action by the government. They also show that the same Confucian norms that exercised considerable constraints upon the lives of some women could be used as cultural resources by others—depending on the social and financial circumstances of their lives.