Jesuits and Matriarchs

Amsler, Nadine

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Catholic women developed their own forms of individual piety, separate places for collective devotion, and distinctive modes of social organization over the course of the seventeenth century. Although the forms of piety practiced by women of different social backgrounds varied, they were all characterized by their close association with domesticity, so that one might speak of a multifaceted “domestic Catholicism” practiced by Chinese women. However, although Chinese Catholic women’s religiosity possessed distinctive features, their “domestic Catholicism” was not a phenomenon sui generis, wholly isolated from Catholic men’s religious activities. It was, rather, closely intertwined with the Chinese Catholic Church as a broader whole. Nothing illuminates this point more lucidly than women’s material contributions to Chinese Catholic networks.

Women played an important role as patronesses of Chinese Catholicism, despite the fact that female patronage was virtually absent from other Chinese religions. Their sponsorship of the China mission is revealing of their religious identities, showing that noble Chinese Catholic benefactresses imagined themselves as members of a multilayered religious community, embracing both the small, local congregation and the globe-spanning Universal Catholic Church.

**FEMALE PATRONESSES OF THE CHINESE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

To any contemporary observer, women’s contributions to the Chinese Church were probably most visible in the form of embroidered textiles. European reports suggest that precious fabrics, usually donated by local women, were an important decorative element of church interiors during the seventeenth century. As a case in point, on a stop in Nanjing in 1670 Manuel de Saldanha, a Portuguese ambassador to the Chinese emperor, was impressed by the local church’s sumptuous decorations of damask and silk tissues. He noted
that these tissues were the gift of a local Catholic benefactress, Agatha Tong. Similarly, the missionaries of Hangzhou reported that their church was embellished with a beautifully embroidered altar frontal, presented to them by the Yang women in 1620, and also by embroidered draperies and a baldachin, made by the women of the same family in 1638. Since women preferred to offer textiles to those churches that they themselves frequented, missionaries repeatedly reported that women’s churches generally surpassed men’s churches with regard to their ornaments and beauty.

There were several reasons for the popularity of textiles as gifts presented to churches by Chinese Catholic women. First, precious textiles were an indispensable ingredient of the Catholic liturgy. In Europe, churches used sumptuously decorated liturgical garments, chalice covers, and altar hangings (which were often crafted by religious women) to underline the sanctity of Catholic rituals. The missionaries therefore warmly welcomed Chinese women’s gifts of textiles, which otherwise had to be bought or imported from faraway places. Furthermore, textiles were also an inherent part of Chinese women’s indigenous religious culture. Devout Buddhist lay women often perceived of embroidery—“the cleanest, purest, and most refined of the womanly arts”—as a devotional act, choosing religious motifs for their needlework and combining the work with prayer or pious recitation. Simultaneously, special symbolic value was attributed to textiles by Confucian moralists, who praised textile-producing women as the cornerstones of a well-ordered society and as symbols of female virtuousness, thus enhancing the symbolic dimension of textiles and making them a source of pride for the women who produced them. Finally, textile production was, moreover, a genuinely female domain, closely connected with most women’s lives. The Annual Letter of 1626 reports, for example, that the Catholic women of a village near Jianchang, Jiangxi, used the traditional weaving and spinning gatherings at dusk for communal prayers, probably substituting traditional songs with Christian texts.

Catholic women’s embroideries were decorated with various motifs, ranging from floral patterns to complicated biblical scenes. What these embroideries might have looked like is illustrated by two surviving eighteenth-century liturgical textiles made of embroidered Chinese silk. They are apt illustrations of how European Christian and Chinese symbolism was blended together in Chinese Catholic liturgical embroideries, resulting in a unique testimony of the Sino-European cultural encounter.

The first example is a chasuble that was probably commissioned by a member of the Geelhands, a Catholic family in Amsterdam, and brought
to Europe by the Dutch East India Company in the eighteenth century (figure 9.1). The chasuble is, at first sight, dominated by Catholic motifs: a medallion showing the Virgin Mary with child is framed by a large cross that stretches over the whole garment. A second look, however, reveals the Chinese origin of the embroidery. Not only the Chinese-looking faces of the Madonna and the baby Jesus, the distinctive shape of their bodies, and the Chinese auspicious clouds that surround them hint at this fact, but the ornamental birds and flowers that decorate the whole chasuble do as well. The phoenixes (*fenghuang*) and peonies were, in China, auspicious symbols of fertility and abundance. The butterflies, furthermore, symbolized joy—in this case, the joy of the Nativity.

The second example is an antependium that was possessed by the Austrian Jesuit Gottfried-Xaver von Laimbeckhoven. While the Geelhand family chasuble was never used in a Chinese Catholic community but brought directly to Europe, this antependium was used in China (figure 9.2). Laimbeckhoven, who lived in China from 1739 until his death in 1787 and was consecrated bishop of Nanjing in 1755, had commissioned
the antependium in a Nanjing embroidery workshop. Its signs of wear show that it was used frequently—be it by Laimbeckhoven or by his successors (the textile was brought to Europe and given to the Episcopal Museum in Haarlem around 1880). Like the Geelhand chasuble, the Laimbeckhoven antependium displays Christian and Chinese symbolism. At its center is a representation of a pelican feeding its young with its own blood, an ancient symbol of Christ’s suffering for mankind. This Christian symbol is combined with decorative elements that are dominated by Chinese auspicious symbolism—peonies and pomegranates—that probably ought to remind the faithful of resurrection and eternal life.

As early photographs of Catholic churches in China suggest, such products of the inner chambers were exhibited and used in the visible and symbolically highly charged environment of the sanctuary (figure 9.3). It is reasonable to contend, therefore, that Chinese women contributed considerably to the creation of a genuinely Chinese Catholic religious material culture during the seventeenth century and beyond.

Women’s financial contributions to the China mission were somewhat less visible than their textile gifts, but they were no less important. Although incomplete records do not allow for an exact quantification of these donations, source evidence nevertheless suggests that they were immensely significant. In particular, two different groups of women
emerge as donors: moderately wealthy women supporting missionaries with rather modest, but frequent, alms and rich gentry women who pledged large sums of money to the China mission.

The main source on moderately rich women’s patronage of the mission is an account book kept by the Changzhou-based Jesuit François de Rougemont during the 1670s, according to which local Catholic communities, and especially Catholic women, played a central role in de Rougemont’s funding. Of the fourteen donations given to de Rougemont over a period of seven months between November 1674 and March 1676, eleven were made by women. Most of the donations, viewed in isolation, were rather modest, ranging from 0.3 to 4.0 taels. Taken together, however, they amounted to an estimated sum of up to 80 taels per year, covering about one-third of de Rougemont’s annual expenditures of around 230 taels. This was a respectable sum, especially when compared with European pensions. If these made their way through conflict-ridden South China, they would have amounted to only 50–60 taels per year. In the absence of other comparable sources, it is impossible to know whether the predominant role...
of moderately rich Chinese Catholic women’s donations, as revealed by de Rougemont’s account book, corresponded to a general pattern for the China mission. The account book does, however, suggest that these women contributed substantially to the mission’s finances in the Jiangnan region during the second half of the seventeenth century.

Gentry women also played a crucial role in the funding of the China mission. A catalog of China’s church buildings compiled by Philippe Couplet around 1680, among other sources, points to this fact. Of the seventeen recorded church buildings funded by Chinese Catholics, twelve were funded by gentry women, and another two were sponsored by gentry men who were close relatives of these noble patronesses. The catalog shows that gentry women’s patronage was especially important during the second half of the seventeenth century. Eleven of the twelve donations made by gentry women date from this period, while the churches sponsored by gentry men all date from the earlier years of the mission.\(^\text{19}\) The catalog suggests, furthermore, that the Jesuits relied upon a small number of patronesses who supported the mission over a comparably long time span. The twelve donations made during the second half of the seventeenth century were contributed by only three gentry women, all of whom had funded at least two church buildings. Agatha Tong was the patron of a new church established in Fuzhou around 1670, and she induced her husband to establish another church in Ganzhou in 1679. Justa Zhao, the wife of a Manchu nobleman, provided funds for the establishment of the East Church (Dongtang) in Beijing as well as for a church in Yangzhou during the 1650s and the 1660s.\(^\text{20}\) Candida Xu’s donations, finally, allowed for the establishment of no fewer than eight churches in four provinces during the 1660s and 1670s.\(^\text{21}\) These few gentry women were exceedingly generous toward the missionaries. They not only provided funds for the establishment of churches, but they also donated large sums to cover the Jesuits’ daily expenditures.\(^\text{22}\)

Of the Jesuits’ female supporters in China, Candida Xu was clearly the most generous patroness. Several substantial donations by her, made during the period of her widowhood between circa 1650 and 1680, are recorded by the Jesuits. At some point before 1664, when the missionaries were in an especially constrained financial situation, Candida supported each of the twenty-five Jesuits living in China with a onetime payment of 200 taels, which provided for their subsistence for a whole year.\(^\text{23}\) When the missionaries were exiled in Canton between 1664 and 1669, Candida provided them with an amount of 12,000 taels, a sum that, according to Adrien Greslon, was key to alleviating the missionaries’ acute penury during their exile.\(^\text{24}\)
From 1671 until her death in 1680, she provided an annual stipend of 1,000 taels to Philippe Couplet, which was probably distributed among several missionaries. In total, the donations made by Candida over about a thirty-year period amounted to, according to Couplet’s estimate, no less than 50,000 taels (church donations probably excluded)—a sum that would have sufficed to cover the daily expenditures of all Jesuits in China for almost a decade.  

**MOTIVATIONS AND RESOURCES**

That gentry women played an important role as patronesses of Chinese Catholicism is especially noteworthy in view of their conspicuous absence from traditional Chinese networks of religious patronage. As historian Timothy Brook points out in his study of the Chinese gentry’s patronage of Buddhist monasteries, Chinese religious patronage “tended to be a male activity, and tended even more so to be represented as such.” With the exception of court ladies, who occasionally acted as patrons of imperially sponsored temples, women were virtually absent from donor lists of Chinese religious institutions. Why was it, then, that women played such an important role in the patronage of Chinese Catholicism?

To examine this question, it is helpful to turn our gaze to Europe and to the Jesuits’ attitudes toward religious patronage. A look into the history of the Society of Jesus shows that the missionaries’ openly acknowledged reliance on funding from Chinese gentry women formed part of a longer tradition. Since its beginnings, the Society had sought the support of wealthy ladies. Noblewomen like the Marchesa della Tolfa (the original patron of the Roman College) and Giovanna d’Aragona (the founder of the Society’s first Roman novitiate) had played an important role in the founding years of the Society in Rome. Similarly, when the Jesuits established themselves in Bologna and Florence, their enterprise was financially supported by local noblewomen. Although the tremendous influence of female patrons decreased after the founding era, noblewomen remained important supporters of the Jesuits throughout the early modern period. It is probable that the Jesuits’ European experience with female religious patronage made them look for a similar support system in China. The missionaries’ focus on female benefactors may also have been stimulated, during the second half of the seventeenth century, by the wealthy literati’s lack of inclination to publicly subsidize the “foreigners” from the far West. The financial basis of the mission was also, generally speaking, highly vulnerable in the decades after the
Manchu conquest, which may have provided additional impetus. Although the sources do not contain information about the ways Chinese benefactresses were recruited, it is reasonable to assume that the Jesuits actively encouraged Catholic gentry women in China to financially support them.

Gentry women’s important role as benefactresses of Chinese Catholicism shows that the absence of women as patrons of Chinese religious institutions cannot be explained, as previous research has assumed, by the restrictive property laws imposed on Chinese women. Gentry women’s donations show that Chinese women, although not formally entitled to inheritance, had access to financial resources and were able to use them for religious patronage. As the example of Candida Xu suggests, widowhood facilitated women’s activities as benefactresses. It was, however, no precondition. Agatha Tong, for example, was an active benefactress of the mission during the years of her marriage to Tong Guoqi, while François de Rouge-mont’s account book also mentions several married women who financially supported the mission (among them the wife [niangniang] of a certain Yuen Xicheu, the wife of a one Hoam Ye Kim, and the wife of an official called Yang).

On which financial resources did women draw for their donations? One might expect that the most obvious financial source for Catholic gentry women to exploit was their dowry, late imperial women’s only private property. Dowries, and especially nuptial jewelry, do indeed seem to have played a role in donations to the mission. For instance, the daughter of Stephan Han Yun, a Catholic juren degree holder from Jiangzhou, was reported to have donated necklaces, earrings, and “other nuptial jewelry” for the building of a women’s church in her father’s house in 1629. It is probable, similarly, that the “hairpins, rings, and bracelets” contributed by the Catholic women of Songjiang for the funding of a gold chalice in late 1670 also came from women’s dowries, as did the “gold and silver jewelry such as rings, earrings, and golden buttons of their dress” contributed by the Catholic women of Beijing to fund the decoration of the newly established women’s church in 1693.

Dowries were, however, neither the only nor, it seems, the most important resource on which Catholic benefactresses drew. Widows, especially, also donated money that they had earned with their manual work. This is aptly illustrated by Candida Xu, who became the most important benefactress of the Jesuits’ mission despite the fact that her family was not exceedingly rich. Philippe Couplet explained that Candida donated money that she had earned with her textile work to the missionaries and that she never
touched the property and income of her son. Couplet claimed that it was Candida’s proficiency in silk embroidery and weaving that enabled her to earn considerable sums of money. He informs us that Candida and her daughters and maidservants produced textile products that they sold in the local market. Candida then invested her earnings in an unspecified business run by two of her servants. Since these business activities went well, she became rich “thanks to their clever investments, and to God’s blessing.”

While no specific information about Candida’s business activities is available, it is possible to shed some light on the nature of her involvement with textile production. As usual in seventeenth-century Jiangnan, Candida’s household was engaged in various stages of textile production. The first step was probably the production of raw silk. As pointed out by Xu Guangqi’s family letters, the Xu women in Shanghai had great skill in raising silkworms, and it is probable that Candida also made use of these skills after she married into her husband’s family in Songjiang. It is unlikely that Candida and her maidservants spun silk yarn themselves (a task that was often performed by peasant women). Rather, it was a common custom for genteel households to sell their raw silk and buy ready-made yarn. As a consequence, weaving, not spinning, was the second step of textile production in which Candida’s household was involved. According to Couplet, the production of “silk weaves” (*tissus de soye*) was Candida’s main source of income. Embroidery, the third stage of production that Candida was involved in, was, as shown above, a very popular activity among gentry women in late imperial China.

In view of previous research, the finding that textile production was the basis of Candida Xu’s lavish patronage of the China mission is noteworthy. Proto-industrialization, by the seventeenth century, had prompted significant shifts in the gendered division of labor in textile production, not least in Candida’s hometown, Songjiang, which was a major center of proto-industrialized textile production. According to Francesca Bray, women, who had domestically produced all types of textiles at the beginning of the Ming dynasty, were by the seventeenth century divested of their role as independent producers by urban “loom households,” which were dominated by male family heads and manufacturers hiring male weavers. These relegated women to the performance of single stages of textile production, such as the raising of silkworms or the spinning of yarn, generally resulting in their marginalization. Candida’s example shows how the new gendered division of labor prevalent in China’s seventeenth-century textile production did not necessarily result in a devaluation of women’s work. Rather,
women’s active participation in various steps of textile production could still be a source of wealth for a family, and it could even provide women with financial resources for individual use.

**CHARITY AND WOMEN’S CATHOLIC IDENTITY**

What do women’s donations tell us about their relationship to Chinese Catholicism? For which purposes did they pledge money, and how did this relate to their perception of the Jesuits’ mission? A study of Chinese gentry women’s donations is especially rewarding for these questions. While moderately rich women usually supported only local missionaries, gentry women also directed their alms toward other goals. This reveals gentry women’s identification with the Catholic community at different levels: the local, the imperial, and the global.

Direct donations to the local community were the dominant pattern in Chinese Catholic women’s almsgiving. Numerous sources testify to that. While François de Rougemont’s account book reveals that missionaries relied heavily on their local Catholic communities for subsistence, numerous references in annual letters illustrate how major pious projects, such as the establishment of new house oratories, were usually funded by women from the locality. Furthermore, Couplet’s biography of Candida Xu provides ample evidence of her activity as benefactress of the local church in Songjiang.

Couplet’s book is particularly instructive about the different directions that women’s patronage of the local Catholic communities could take. The Jesuit mentions the wide array of charitable activities his spiritual daughter pursued. First, Candida directly supported a large number of people with direct monetary contributions. She gave alms to poor Catholics of Songjiang and covered their funeral costs, provided for the livelihood of catechists and Catholic women caring for the sick, and supported the evangelizing work of Catholic midwives and blind storytellers. Second, Candida supported the manufacturing of various pious commodities for the local church, including the printing of devotional books and the fabrication of devotional objects and images distributed among the Catholics of Songjiang. Third, she provided funds for the establishment of around thirty smaller churches established in the surroundings of Songjiang, which thus became one of the most important centers of gravity of early modern Chinese Catholicism. Fourth, and finally, she supported projects in which Catholic charity converged with non-Catholic Chinese charity. As a case
in point, she indirectly supported an orphanage established as a joint effort between her son, Basil Xu Zuanzeng, and other, non-Catholic officials.\textsuperscript{49} The nature of Candida Xu’s various charitable activities, from which the Songjiang Catholics benefited, clearly indicates how she aimed to play an active part in the Jesuits’ missionary projects in her husband’s home city. Rather than see herself relegated to the purely receptive role of a newly converted Catholic, Candida perceived of herself as a missionary. She not only actively engaged in the business of conversion by financing missionary personnel but also strengthened new Catholics’ loyalties to their religion through financial support.

The Songjiang area was not, however, the only beneficiary of Candida’s patronage. Candida, along with other Catholic gentry women, also entertained a more abstract project: the building of a “Chinese Church,” which would ideally embrace all people living under the aegis of the Chinese emperor. These women’s awareness of the existence of an empire-wide Catholic network is especially well illustrated by the data concerning their sponsorship of church buildings, which spans an astonishing geographical range. Justa Zhao patronized churches in Beijing and in Yangzhou and Hangzhou, more than a thousand kilometers south of the capital. The Nanjing-based Agatha Tong and her husband provided funds for churches in Ganzhou and Fuzhou. Candida Xu’s patronage spanned the greatest distances. Based in Songjiang, she sponsored the establishment of churches in four provinces: Jiangnan (former South Zhili), Jiangxi, Huguang, and Sichuan, the fourth located two thousand kilometers from her hometown.\textsuperscript{50} How did this female sponsorship of Catholicism in the remote corners of the Chinese empire come about?

The biographies of the women under consideration show that their patronage of church buildings in far-flung regions of the Chinese empire was closely intertwined with the mobility of their male family members. Justa Zhao, in particular, like Candida Xu, traveled in the retinue of her son, who, as an imperial official, held office far from his hometown. This behavior was not unusual for gentry women in contemporary China. Wives and mothers of officials often traveled with their husbands and sons when they took office in a different province. Dorothy Ko has pointed out that gentry women perceived of these journeys as duties resulting from the Confucian imperative of “Thrice Following” (\textit{sancong}). Simultaneously, these women welcomed them as sightseeing experiences that made for an exciting change from their otherwise sedentary life.\textsuperscript{51} The opportunities
they provided to actively participate in the Jesuits’ attempts to construct a Chinese Church lent them yet another dimension.

The record of Candida Xu offers an especially apt illustration of how Catholic women used their journeys for their own evangelizing purposes. Traveling in the retinue of her son, Basil, Candida covered a distance of more than four thousand kilometers over a comparably short period, between 1660 and 1662. She traveled from Songjiang westward to Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi; from Nanchang northwestward to Wuchang, in Huguang; and then all the way back to Songjiang. Both in Nanchang and Wuchang, Candida spent much of her energy revitalizing or creating a local church. During her stay in Nanchang, she supervised the restoration of the missionary station, which had been destroyed during the Manchu invasion, and she provided the funds for establishing a new church. The local Catholics reportedly loved her for her piety and largesse. When Candida left the city, they gathered in large groups to accompany her to her ship and bid her farewell. During her stay in Wuchang, Candida also oversaw the establishment of a new church. This time, she was in the company of a Jesuit, Jacques Motel, who assisted her in her religious endeavors and served as the church’s priest.

Just like Candida, Justa Zhao traveled in the retinue of her son. A native of Liaodong in the far north, she converted to Catholicism together with her son, Simon, during her stay in Beijing. There, in 1653, she sponsored the East Church for the missionaries Ludovico Buglio and Gabriel de Magalhães. When Simon took office in Yangzhou, she accompanied him south to his new place of residence, where she patronized the renovation of the local church in 1662. She also traveled with her son when he was appointed to a post in Fujian. Her plan to establish a church in Fujian, however, was thwarted by a pirate attack. That forced Justa and Simon to prematurely retire to Yangzhou.

Candida Xu and Justa Zhao apparently saw it as their religious vocation to personally oversee mission work during their stays in different cities of the Chinese empire. Candida, for instance, was reported to have compared her journey to the itineraries of the European missionaries, who “traveled so many miles [li] for the salvation of the Chinese and for the glory of the true God.” According to information collected for an annual letter, the Jesuits’ devotion to the mission made her want to make some similar sacrifice: “Am I to fear [a journey of] nine thousand miles in honor of God and for the eternal salvation of my people?” Candida’s self-perception as a
missionary was also emphasized in a vision experienced by one of her maidservants, who allegedly dreamed that the Holy Mother wished her mistress “to work in the uncultivated fields” of China’s western provinces.  

Poor travel conditions probably reinforced Candida’s perception of her journey as a spiritual exercise. Jacques Motel, who accompanied the lady on the boat trip from Nanchang to Wuchang, stressed how incommodious travel was with the Xus, as compared, at least, with life onshore. That was despite the party’s consisting of a veritable small fleet, with separate boats for Basil; his wife, Philippa; his mother, Candida; and Motel himself. The travelers were troubled by bad weather when winter approached and as the party moved eastward into more mountainous areas. They also lived in constant fear of banditry, and they were thrown into a veritable panic when they mistook approaching boats for a pirate’s fleet. These challenges assimilated Candida’s experience to the experiences of European missionaries, who had to endure all sorts of hardship and privation for their missionary vocation.

Although gentry women probably found the role of the female missionary to the Chinese provinces a fulfilling one, their personal presence was not compulsory for the financial support of Catholic communities living in remote places. Instead, it was possible to entrust the realization of projects for church patronage to a close male relative who traveled the empire. Basil Xu Zuanzeng’s initiative to establish a residence in Chengdu and Chongqing (both in Sichuan), and in Kaifeng (Henan), probably resulted from this gendered division of labor, just like Tong Guoqi’s initiatives for church buildings in Ganzhou (Jiangxi) and Fuzhou (Fujian). This gendered division of labor resembled that of lay Buddhist women patrons, who are known to have frequently moved their sons or husbands in order to make a contribution to a monastery.

Catholic gentry women’s sponsorship of churches in different corners of the Chinese empire indicates that they strongly identified with the Jesuits’ aim of building a Chinese Church. This suggests that women of literati families perceived of the Chinese empire as a meaningful point of reference for their personal identities and were far from exclusively interested in domestic matters or the welfare of their local community. In this regard, they resembled their male relatives, who strongly identified themselves as Chinese thanks to their close ties to government, forged by imperial examinations and the distribution of offices.

While most Catholic gentry women’s patronage stopped at the borders of the Chinese empire, some Chinese Catholic women’s donations extended
even farther. As a case in point, Candida Xu and other Catholic women of Songjiang furnished their spiritual father, Philippe Couplet, with lavish gifts—a gold chalice, many embroidered pieces, and other ornaments—when he traveled to Europe as a procurator in 1680. Some of these gifts were destined for different places crucial to the Jesuits’ global mission: the sepulchers of St. Francis Xavier in Goa or St. Ignatius in Rome. Others, furthermore, were given to some of the Society’s smaller European institutions, such as the church in Couplet’s hometown, Mechelen, and the novitiate in Paris. The Songjiang women’s gifts were—with only one exception—destined for institutions of the Society of Jesus, which shows the strong loyalty that Candida Xu and other Catholic women felt toward the Jesuits. But they also testify, at least to some extent, to their donors’ awareness of their local religious community’s embeddedness into a globe-spanning enterprise. They suggest that the missionaries’ attempts to convey the idea of the “Universal Catholic Church” to their Chinese flock were, to some extent, successful and that the Jesuit presence in China prompted a small group of Catholic women to take an active interest in previously unknown regions at the other end of the Eurasian continent.