Jesuits and Matriarchs

Amsler, Nadine

Published by University of Washington Press

Amsler, Nadine.
Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/63509.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63509

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3084825
CONCLUSION

Women and Gender in Global Catholicism

In a 1994 article on the role of women in the Catholic mission to China, Jean-Pierre Duteil speculated about the state of Chinese women. According to Duteil, the latter were condemned to seclusion and mutilation, which was probably “one of the main obstacles to the general conversion of the Middle Kingdom that the Catholic missionaries aimed for.”¹ These assertions were strongly influenced by what historians of women in China have criticized as a distorted “victimized ‘feudal’ women” viewpoint.² In light of the preceding chapters, they must be revised in two ways. First, the Jesuits’ difficulties in gaining access to women was not merely the result of Chinese women’s great seclusion but was also an effect of the missionaries’ deliberate decision to adapt their lifestyle to that of the literati elite. Second, the missionaries’ limited contact with women did by no means result in the latter’s passivity. Rather, it prompted women to organize their piety independently and to rely on predominantly female religious networks to do so. Although the Confucian ideal of the separation of the sexes structured Chinese Catholic devotional life in crucial ways, it did not preclude women’s agency within the domestic realm and their determining role in seventeenth-century Chinese Catholicism. These two hypotheses—the crucial importance of missionary masculinities and of Chinese Catholic domestic piety for the understanding of women’s role in Chinese Christianity—encapsulate the main findings of this study.

How did Chinese Catholic women and their unique religious culture fit into the larger whole of the Catholic Church that was becoming, during the early modern era, a global institution?³ Is it possible to integrate their religiosity into a more complete picture, encompassing female Catholic religiosity around the globe?
CONCLUSION

If we believe Philippe Couplet, Candida Xu was not satisfied with the idea of sending gifts to Europe. She would have wished “to cross the seas and come to Europe [herself] in order to find new missionaries who were ready to join the small number of missionaries” working in Asia.⁴ Although this wish was not fulfilled during Candida’s lifetime, it was posthumously realized by Couplet. With his biography of Candida Xu, he brought the Jesuits’ Chinese patroness into the studies and reading rooms of pious European Catholics, hoping that it would transform his late spiritual daughter into a forceful promoter of the Jesuits’ China mission in Europe by inciting the pious fervor of devout Catholic noblewomen and encouraging them to direct alms toward the China mission.⁵

Couplet’s hopes were not baseless. When he wrote Candida’s biography, a small, but potent, network of rich European ladies supporting the Jesuits’ China mission already existed.⁶ In Madrid, the Jesuits could rely on the support of the Portuguese noblewoman Maria de Guadalupe of Lencastre y Cárdenas Manrique, Duchess of Aveiro (1630–1715).⁷ In Genoa, they received alms from a woman of the Lomellini clan, a Genoese elite family heavily involved with their city’s maritime trade.⁸ In Antwerp, Elisabeth, Maria Anna, and Clara Johanna de Prince—three sisters involved in selling the famous religious prints of the city—were fervent supporters of the Jesuits in China.⁹ Finally, the Jesuits were also in contact with ladies of the French upper nobility based in Paris, including Marie d’Orléans-Longueville, Duchess of Nemours (1625–1707), and Marie Anne Mancini, Duchess of Bouillon (1649–1714).¹⁰ These women’s support for the China mission was not only part of the long tradition of close Jesuit ties to pious elite women but was also embedded within a general trend of female elite religiosity in late seventeenth-century Catholic Europe. At the time, many influential Catholic women, prodded by their Jesuit confessors, became fervent supporters of the overseas missions of the Society of Jesus.¹¹

Despite the importance of the mission’s female noble supporters in seventeenth-century Europe, Couplet’s The Story of a Christian Lady of China apparently failed to trigger a wave of enthusiasm among female patrons. Although the mission found new female supporters during the eighteenth century, these women do not seem to have taken special interest in the life of Candida Xu, and it is not even clear whether they knew of Couplet’s book.¹² We do know, however, of at least one case in which Couplet’s stay in Europe prompted European women to financially support the
mission. A donation deed stored in the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus proves that Couplet’s stay in Antwerp in 1684 motivated the three de Prince sisters to offer “to the Revered Father Couplet, the procurator of the Chinese province, a sum of six hundred florins . . . for the building of a chapel in the mission of the Chinese province.” According to the deed, the chapel should be dedicated to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and decorated with a picture that the three ladies ordered from the painter Jacob de Nijs of Mantua. Unfortunately, Couplet died on his return to China, and as a consequence we do not know whether the de Prince sisters’ plan ever came to fruition. Although they had started to become connected thanks to some fine threads spun by the Jesuits, the worlds of Chinese and European women remained largely separate at the end of the seventeenth century.

**Comparisons**

How did Chinese women’s position within the Catholic Church differ from the position of Catholic women elsewhere in the world, and what does that tell us about women’s place within Catholicism on a global scale? When we look at the issue from a comparative perspective, one element of Chinese Catholic women’s religiosity stands out: its tendency to be domestic in nature. The crucial role of domesticity for Chinese Catholic women’s piety distinguished the latter not only from Chinese Christian men’s piety, which was closely tied to the (semi)public space of the church, but also from European post-Tridentine religious cultures. These have been aptly described as essentially clerical, public, and community-based—as opposed to the strong emphasis of domestic religion in Reformed and Lutheran communities. Although community-based devotion also mattered in China, Christianity’s special status as a minority religion on the fringes of heresy prevented it from becoming the public religion characterized by pilgrimages and processions that it had become in Catholic Europe. Like Catholic minorities in Protestant countries such as England and the Dutch Republic, Chinese Christians, and especially Chinese Christian women’s congregations, often sought shelter in the domestic realm for the unhindered practice of their religion. The household thus became the focal point of female Catholic religiosity. Thanks to Chinese women, Catholicism became a domestic religion in seventeenth-century China.

The ways Chinese Catholic women’s religiosity deviated from the standard religiosity propagated by Tridentine reformers in Europe fits well into
the larger picture of early modern Asian Catholic communities. As research carried out over the past two decades has shown, these often defy the traditional picture of the post-Tridentine period as an era of religious standardization and homogenization (a picture that, incidentally, is also increasingly challenged by specialists of European religious history). While the Catholic religious culture of coastal South India has been described as a “tropical Catholicism,” created by various “process[es] of appropriation,” the Christians of the Middle East have been characterized as a people with multifaceted religious identities who moved between cultures. As for early modern Chinese Catholicism, several historians have pointed to its great degree of indigenization, showing how local actors interwove different cultural strands, and have suggested that we understand Chinese Catholic communities as “local Christianities” that were, at one and the same time, part of the Universal Catholic Church and genuinely Chinese religious communities.

A focus on gender relations has the potential to add a new perspective to the research on the plurality of early modern Catholicism. It can show that local forms of Catholicism were shaped not only by cultural and social patterns of local societies but also—and crucially—by the ways societies imagined and practiced differences between the sexes. It can help shed new light on how missionaries’ masculine identities shaped their options for action and how gender relations influenced the social organization of the church. Last but not least, it brings into focus a group of people largely neglected in studies on early modern Catholicism: non-European, female Catholics, who were frequently less visible in the dominant, European discourse but nevertheless active participants in early modern Catholicism.

That gender is a fruitful perspective not only for the study of the early modern China mission but also for research on Catholic communities in other regions of the world has been demonstrated by pioneering studies focusing on Catholic women in the Americas, India, and Japan. All of them are successful efforts to salvage information on female religious lives from predominantly male source records. They point to how Catholic women’s experiences varied in colonial and non- or semicolonial settings: while women in colonial South America were frequently integrated into religious institutions under close European surveillance, Asian women often enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom within the Catholic Church. In the future, historians might be able to assemble these single pieces to form a more complete picture comparing and contrasting the gender
arrangements of different early modern Catholic communities across the globe. This will doubtlessly further complicate our picture of the post-Tridentine Church and will help to unearth additional evidence of historical realities that diverged from, or ran counter to, the European, male discourse that has for so long dominated the history of early modern Catholicism.