Chinese Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China
The Tortuous Transition from the "Institute of Virgins" to Diocesan Religious Congregations

R.G. Tiedemann

A more discerning look at the history of Christianity in China reveals quite clearly that the foreign faith would have found it extremely difficult to persist without the vital role played by various Chinese facilitators. Indeed, the first missionaries to enter the Chinese mainland were rather fortunate to arrive at a time when the intellectual climate of the late Ming encouraged some prominent literati (*wenren* 文人) to challenge the teachings of the imperially sanctioned version of Neo-Confucianism. In other words, China's scholars were more open to new ideas, especially with regard to science and knowledge. As Ronnie Hsia has shown so eloquently, it was the network of friends and acquaintances that enabled Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 (1552–1610) and his companions to overcome the many obstacles during their difficult journey to Beijing in 1601.[1] Crucial to Ricci's early Christianizing endeavours was the conversion of several influential Confucian officials. Much has been written in recent decades about the so-called "Three Pillars of the Catholic Church," namely Paulus Xu Guangqi 徐光启 (1562–1633), Leo Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1565–1630)[2] and Michael Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1557–1627).[3] These as well as some other early "Christianized Confucians" certainly were important to the initial implantation of Christianity

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Prof. Dr. R.G. Tiedemann is a historian with special interest in the history of Christianity in China and the Boxer Movement (義和團運動). Following his retirement from the University of London, he has been teaching in the School of History and Culture, Shandong University, Jinan, China. The following text is his contribution to the international Workshop "'I have called you by name' – Contribution of Chinese Women to the Church," Sankt Augustin, Germany, September 25–26, 2014. A conference report was published in *Religions & Christianity in Today's China* V (2015) 1, pp. 30-38. A publication of the workshop papers in English language by the Steyl Institute of Missiology and the Institute Monumenta Serica in cooperation with the China-Zentrum, all Sankt Augustin, Germany is in preparation. The Monumenta Serica Sinological Research Center, Taipei, Taiwan will publish a volume of the workshop papers in Chinese language. [Editors' note.]

1 R. Hsia Po-chia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012. It is sometimes forgotten that Ricci did not travel alone to Beijing. He was accompanied by the Spanish Jesuit Diego de Pantoja 龐迪我 (1571–1618), as well as by the Chinese Jesuit lay brothers Zhong Mingren 鐘鳴仁 (鐘巴相, a.k.a. Sebastian Fernandes; 1562–1622) and You Wenhui 游文輝 (a.k.a. Manoel Pereira; 1575–1633).

2 Li Zhizao was a Chinese mathematician, astronomer, geographer as well as an early Catholic convert. He had assisted in the production of Ricci's world map of 1602.

3 Nicolas Standaert, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China: His Life and Thought*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1988.

in the Chinese Empire. For one thing, they played an essential role in various translation projects and the production of Chinese Christian literature.

However, as the historical record demonstrates so clearly, by the early Qing the scholar-official class was adopting a more orthodox Neo-Confucian approach, rejecting the foreign religion and generally showing less interest in Western learning. After the Yongzheng Emperor's 1724 imperial edict proscribed the "Teaching of the Lord of Heaven" as a heterodox cult, Christianity began to suffer severe restrictions. Especially in the second half of the eighteenth century, when most foreign priests had been expelled, the few remaining missionaries not based at the Court in Beijing had to secretly visit their flocks and minister to the faithful in what had essentially become an underground church in China's vast countryside. It is, indeed, important to recognize the precarious position of the foreign clergy in the Celestial Empire. Since Chinese priests were also in very short supply at this time, the Catholic presence could be preserved only by relying on a variety of Chinese lay personnel. These believers not only protected and materially supported foreigners concealed in Catholic communities; they also managed Church affairs as well as promoted evangelization. It was largely as a result of native agency without sacerdotal supervision that Christianity survived in the Middle Kingdom during the long century of proscription and sporadic persecutions. As a matter of fact, even after the imposition of the so-called "unequal treaty system" in the middle of the nineteenth century, which gave foreign priests legal access to the Middle Kingdom and the Catholic faithful many advantages, the missionary enterprise could not have flourished without the continued reliance on certain groups of indigenous lay people at every step of the way.

It is fair to say that ordinary believers contributed in their own ways to the preservation of the Catholic faith. This essay focuses, however, on local Catholics with particular functions. They were, on the one hand, the leaders of local Catholic congregations (*huizhang* 會長),[4] and, on the other hand, the itinerant catechists (*chuanjiaoyuan* 傳教員, *chuanjiao xiansheng* 傳教先生 or *chuandao xiansheng* 傳道先生).[5] Of particular interest is the fact that many of the catechists' religious functions were also being performed by Catholic women in China. Indeed, female catechists (*nü chuanjiao xiansheng* 女傳教先生) had played an important part in the propagation of the Catholic faith since the seventeenth century. In consequence of the strict custom of segregating the sexes in traditional Chinese society, the conversion of women presented a particular challenge for male evangelists. Thus, the task of propagating the faith amongst women, instructing girls, and administering baptisms fell to certain Christian women. While often widows were engaged in such work, especially as baptizers (*quanxi xiansheng* 權洗先生),[6] we are here interested

4 The *huizhang*, referred to as *administrateurs* in the French missionary literature, appear to be more or less identical to the "sedentary catechists" mentioned by some authors.

5 On the important role played by catechists, see Joseph Schmidlin, *Catholic Mission Theory* (*Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss*), Techny, Ill.: Mission Press, S.V.D. 1931, pp. 311-312. He also mentions, with reference to the expanding missionary enterprise of the late nineteenth century, the priest's personal attendants (*shenfu kai huoji* 神父慨伙記).

6 *Quanxi* 權洗 refers to baptism administered by a lay person in case of necessity.

in a particular group of women, namely the Chinese Catholic "virgins" (*tongzhen* 童貞; *zhennü* 貞女 or *shouzhennü* 守貞女, i.e. "chaste women").[7]

Yet the vital contributions made by ordinary Chinese Christians were for a long time not adequately reflected in the academic literature. Indeed, it is only during the last couple of decades or so that scholars have paid greater attention to the crucial role played by indigenous agents in the introduction, preservation and subsequent reinvigoration of Christianity in the late imperial and republican periods in China. However, as far as the so-called "institute of virgins" is concerned, the scholarly literature has, with a few exceptions, largely remained silent on their dedicated activities.[8] Nearly twenty years ago I did undertake some preliminary research in this field and presented my findings at a workshop in 2001, but it took several years to get the paper on Chinese "virgins" published. Yet it would seem that this publication is not easily accessible, for more recent research into the history of women in the Catholic Church in China has failed to mention it.[9] Perhaps it will be useful to approach once more the subject of unwed Chinese Catholic women in the service of the Church, taking cognizance of more recent research. This paper traces, therefore, the origins and progress of virgins who lived either individually with their families or in some cases in small groups of unmarried women near the local place of worship (*gongsuo* 公所 or *xiaotang* 小堂). Yet while their contribution as a vital force in the preservation of the Catholic faith in beleaguered Christian communities during the years of proscription was acknowledged, with the resumption of evangelization by foreign missionaries in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the European priests – now able to play a

7 A fuller selection of terms, especially in early modern Fujian province, is found in Eugenio Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China,* Cambridge, Mass.: distributed by Harvard University Press 2009, pp. 316-318.

8 The earliest contributions to the study of Chinese women in the Catholic apostolate for the modern period were made by Ortrud Stegmaier (1978) and Sue Bradshaw (1982): Ortrud Stegmaier SSpS, *Missionsdienst am eigenen Volk. Die Herausbildung einheimischer Ordensfrauen durch Steyler Missionare und Missionsschwestern,* Steyl 1978. First published as "Die von den Steyler Missionaren und Missionsschwestern gegründeten einheimischen Schwesterngenossenschaften," in: *Verbum SVD* 1975–1977. The original, unpublished doctoral dissertation contains more detailed information. Sue Bradshaw (Sister), "Religious Women in China: An Understanding of Indigenization," in: *The Catholic Historical Review* 68 (January 1982) 1, pp. 28-45.
For introductory academic studies of the "institute of virgins" before 1800, see Robert E. Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan," in: Daniel H. Bays (ed.), *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1996, pp. 180-193 and 402-405; Eugenio Menegon, "Christian Loyalists, Spanish Friars, and Holy Virgins in Fujian during the Ming-Qing Transition," in: *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003), pp. 335-365; Miguel Ángel San Román, "Cristianos laicos en la misión dominicana del norte de la provincia de Fujian, China, en el siglo XVII," Ph.D. diss., Gregorian University, Rome 2000, pp. 169-178 and *passim*. More recently, Professor Kang of Hubei University has published her findings on the phenomenon of Catholic virgins: Kang Zhijie, "The Yeast of Evangelization: A Study on the Contribution of the Virgin Catechists," in: *Tripod* 33 (Autumn 2013) 170, pp. 12-30. Translated by Eleanor Foo. The original Chinese version is in the same issue: Kang Zhijie 康志杰, "Tamen shi fuchuan de jiaomu: zhennü chuandaoyuan pingshu 她們是福傳的酵母: 貞女傳道員評述," in: *Tripod* 33 (Autumn 2013) 170, pp. 12-26. Her more comprehensive monograph on this phenomenon has been published as: Kang Zhijie 康志杰, *Jidu de xinniang: Zhongguo tianzhujiao zhennü yanjiu* 基督新娘: 中國天主教貞女研究 [Bride of the Christ: The New Research on Chinese Catholic Virgins], Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社 2013.

9 My initial research was eventually published: R.G. Tiedemann, "Controlling the Virgins: Female Propagators of the Faith and the Catholic Hierarchy in China," in: *Women's History Review* 17 (September 2008) 4, pp. 501-520. Because of the protracted nature of getting this article into print, I produced another article on this topic: R.G. Tiedemann, "A Necessary Evil: The Contribution of Chinese 'Virgins' to the Growth of the Catholic Church in Late Qing China," in: Jessie Gregory Lutz (ed.), *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press 2010, pp. 87-107.

dominant role in Catholic Church life in China – began to view the "institute of virgins" in a rather more ambivalent light. They were concerned about the relative independence of these laywomen in Christian communities and wanted them to lead more structured lives. Thus, from about the middle of the nineteenth century the idea of creating Chinese religious sisterhoods began to emerge, especially after the first European female religious congregations to provide appropriate supervision were beginning to be accommodated in the Middle Kingdom in the late 1840s. The essay will, therefore, conclude with some comments on these emerging Chinese communities of women religious.

The Early History of the "Institute of Virgins" in China

It has long been established that certain Chinese Christian women were from an early date actively involved in the life of the Church. The most prominent among them is no doubt the widow Candida Xu 徐甘弟大 (1607–1680), granddaughter of Xu Guangqi. The Jesuit missionary Philippe Couplet introduced her to European readers in 1688[10] and she has received considerable attention in the recent scholarly literature.[11] It is, however, rather more difficult to determine when the first unmarried Chinese Catholic women consecrated their lives to the service of God and took a vow of chastity. Eugenio Menegon has established that Dominican friars transmitted the Spanish tradition of the cloistered beatas ("blessed women") via the Philippines to the important early Christian communities in the Fu'an 福安 area of Fujian.[12] Referring to a report by the Spanish Dominican Francisco Varo 萬濟國 (1627–1687), Menegon adds that Chinese beatas were living "in their natal homes, rigorously respecting the fasts, penances, and other mortifications of the Third Order of Penance, and that their parents or brothers gave them a special room to do their pious exercises."[13] According to Benno Biermann OP, there were twelve Christian virgins in Fu'an in 1649, twenty-four in 1695 and fifty in 1714.[14] In spite of Qing official opposition and social abhorrence of the existence of unmarried females in a society where all women were expected to marry and produce male heirs, there were said to be over two hundred Christian virgins in Fu'an county alone in the mid-eighteenth century.[15]

10 Philippe Couplet, *Histoire d'une dame chrétienne de la Chine où, par occasion, les usages de ces peoples, l'établissement de la Religion, les manieres des Missionnaires & les Exercises de Pieté des nouveaux Chrétiens sont expliquez*, Paris: Estienne Michallet 1688.

11 Note, *inter alia*, Noel Golvers, "Le role de la femme dans la mission catholique au dix-septième siècle au Jiangnan: Philippe Couplet et sa biographie de Candida Xu (1607–1680)," in: *Courier Verbiest*, Bulletin Trimestriel, X (June 1998); Gail King, "Candida Xu and the Growth of Christianity in China in the Seventeenth Century," in: *Monumenta Serica* 46 (1998), pp. 49-66; idem, "Christian Women of China in the Seventeenth Century," in: Lutz (ed.), *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, pp. 55-86; Claudia von Collani, "Lady Candida Xu: A Widow between Chinese and Christian Ideals," in: Lutz (ed.), *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, pp. 224-245.

12 Eugenio Menegon, "Child Bodies, Blessed Bodies: The Contest between Christian Virginity and Confucian Chastity," in: Lutz (ed.), *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, pp. 108-140, here pp. 118-125.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

14 Benno Biermann, *Die Anfänge der neueren Dominikanermission in China*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1927, pp. 113, 163 and 165.

15 Menegon, "Child Bodies, Blessed Bodies," p. 112.

Whereas the phenomenon of celibate Christian women in Fujian is closely related to the *beata* system of the Philippines,[16] recent research has shown that unwed Christian women were already present in the Jiangnan 江南 region prior to the arrival of Spanish Dominicans in China. Although there may already have been some Christian virgins in Nanjing during the first decade of the seventeenth century, Zhao Huaqing found in his doctoral research that *zhennü* 貞女 who preserved their chastity can definitely be traced to 1627, for in that year Agnes Yang, the daughter of Yang Tingyun, opened a "virgins house" (*zhennüyuan* 貞女院) in the southern imperial capital.[17] How this phenomenon was introduced in the Lower Yangzi region remains, however, an issue for further research.

In Sichuan province lay celibacy, practiced by men as well as women, first appeared without close supervision or influence by Catholic clergy. The task of establishing a so-called "institute of Christian virgins" was initiated by the Italian Dominican Luigi Maria Maggi (died 1743), who had been elected coadjutor vicar apostolic of Sichuan in 1738 and vicar apostolic in 1742. He began to draft regulations for celibate women, based on rules established by the Dominicans in Fujian. As a matter of fact, the link between Fujian and Sichuan, where secular priests of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) were primarily in charge, appears to have been quite strong. According to Robert Entenmann, "One of the Chinese priests in Sichuan, Antonius Dang Huairen [黨懷仁], had served in Fujian in the 1720s, where his duties included supervising a group of 'virgins dedicated to Christ.'"[18] In this connection, it should also be noted that the MEP maintained a missionary outpost in Fujian at Xinghua 興化 (now Putian 莆田) well into the early nineteenth century. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to assume that the priests in Sichuan were familiar with the *beata* phenomenon in the Dominican mission of Fujian. After Maggi's death in 1743, the vicar apostolic of Yunnan and administrator of Sichuan, Hu-Guang (Hubei and Hunan), and Guizhou, Joachim Enjobert de Martiliat MEP 馬青山 (1706–1755) completed and published the first detailed rules of conduct for virgins in a pastoral letter in 1744. His twenty-five rules constantly draw attention to the "virgins of Europe [who] live in a separate dwelling, well cloistered and surrounded on all sides by high walls, in such a way that they have no communication with the outside, nor are they able to leave the threshold

16 In the Philippines quasi-religious communities came into being in the seventeenth century for indigenous women and women of mixed ethnicity (*mestiza*) seeking lives of spiritual perfection. These pious women, many of whom had been accepted as tertiaries by one of the mendicant orders, had hitherto lived in solitude or with their families. Opting for lives of rigorous penitence and contemplation, the *beatas* also assisted with the work among the poor and sick, with the instruction of girls and with various other menial tasks for the Church. Eventually, the *beatas* were permitted to wear a habit and profess what in effect were private vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. R.G. Tiedemann, "Christianity in East Asia," Chapter 13, in: Stewart J. Brown – Timothy Tackett (eds.), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 7: *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660–1815*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, pp. 453-454.

17 Zhao Huaqing, *Die Missionsgeschichte Chinas, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bedeutung der Laien bei der Missionierungsarbeit* (*ca. 16.–19. Jh.*), Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag 2012, pp. 200-201. Zhao culled the information concerning the involvement of Agnes Yang from the work of the Chinese Jesuit Joseph Xiao Jingshan 蕭靜山 若瑟, *Tianzhujiao chuanxing Zhongguo kao* 天主教傳行中國考 [Examination of the Propagation of the Catholic Religion in China], Xianxian 1937, p. 262. Zhao adds, however, that, according to Louis Pfister, it was the Portuguese Jesuit Rui de Figueiredo 斐樂德 (1594–1642) who established the "virgins house" in Nanjing, which was maintained by "Agathe, fille du célèbre Dr Michel Yang." Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine 1552–1773*, Vol. I, Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique 1932, p. 159.

18 Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan," p. 404 note 24.

even with half a step."[19] Although it was not possible to establish convents in eighteenth-century China, the *Rules* of 1744 expected celibate Chinese Catholic women to live similarly cloistered, contemplative lives, but within the household of their own family. Indeed, no female would be admitted to the "institute of Christian virgins" unless her family could support her.[20] Because those who preserve their virginity and are, therefore, "among the Christians who are superior to all the rest," these "fragrant flowers in the garden of the Church" were expected to lead exemplary lives.[21] As Martiliat pointed out in the introduction to the *Rules for Virgins* (*Tongzhen xiugui* 童貞修規):

> *It is proper for the virgins to maintain their purity unto death, both internally and externally, that their hearts be innocent of all carnal desire, and their bodies pure of all shameful acts, that they think of nothing but of heavenly things, and live separate from the world. Virginity is excellent, but it has many enemies; the burden is heavy, and the road of life is long, and for that reason it will be necessary to set forth rules by which the virgins may be directed on that road ...*[22]

The introduction of a rule for virgins by Martiliat was no doubt an attempt by the foreign missionary enterprise to provide guidance as well as regulate and control the lives of celibate laywomen in Sichuan. In theory, at least, failure of the virgins to "follow all the above regulations exactly" would have consequences. Thus, "if they do not mend their ways … they will be expelled from the Society of Virgins."[23] Living up to the ideals of the rule was, however, not easily achieved in the eighteenth century. In the absence of a comprehensive Christian institutional infrastructure (convents, orphanages, schools) and the acute paucity of priests, close supervision of what essentially remained a loose association of celibate women living under a common rule was not easily achieved. In 1746, two years after the *Rules* had been introduced, a persecution forced Martiliat and other missionaries to leave China. For the next ten years the Chinese priest Andreas Ly 李安德 (1693–1774) was the senior clergyman in the entire province of Sichuan, assisted by two other indigenous priests. During these difficult times, the Catholic Church had to rely to an even greater extent on native agency in Sichuan and elsewhere. Besides the few priests, Christian lay people – including the virgins – were called upon to work toward the preservation of the faith in their communities (referred to as *chrétientés* in the French missionary literature).

It was under the bold apostolate of the French priest Jean-Martin Moÿe MEP 梅慕雅 (1730–1793) that the innovative activist role of virgins was developed and expanded after

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19 Martiliat is obviously referring to European contemplative "nuns" rather than externally active apostolic "sisters." Sadly, these days this important distinction between "nuns" and "sisters" is rarely made in the academic literature.

20 See Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan," pp. 184-185. For an English translation of the *Rules for Virgins* of 1744, see Robert Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Early Qing Sichuan," in: Lutz (ed.), *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, pp. 141-158, here pp. 147-155. Entenmann has translated the Latin version that is available in the Archives of Propaganda Fide and was reprinted in Adrien Launay, *Histoire des Missions de Chine. Missions du Se-tchouan*, Paris: Tequi 1920, Vol. 2, "Appendices," pp. 13-20. Note also that Zhao Huaqing, *Die Missionsgeschichte Chinas*, pp. 210-218, has summarized the *Rules* based on the Chinese version: Ma Qingshan 馬青山 [Martiliat], *Tongzhen xiugui* 童貞修規 [Rules for Virgins], 1744, reprinted Chongqing 1921.

21 Passages from Martiliat's pastoral letter of 1 November 1744, translated text in Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Early Qing Sichuan," p. 146.

22 Quote in *ibid*., p. 147.

23 Martiliat's Rule 25, in *ibid*., p. 154.

his clandestine arrival in Sichuan in 1773. Among the several non-sacerdotal duties the celibate women were expected to perform instead of priests, their role of baptizers took on particular significance in remarkably new ways. Moÿe, who had been greatly influenced by the French Lazarist theologian Pierre Collet (1693–1770),[24] attached much importance to the baptism of infants *in periculo mortis*. During the great famine which started in eastern Sichuan in 1777 and was followed by deadly plague, he sent a significant number of these unmarried Chinese women into the villages to baptize children "in danger of death." It is thought that as many as 27,000 youngsters were thus spared the horrors of eternal damnation. Naturally, Moÿe praised the sacrifices and "supernatural powers and courage" of these devoted women who had freely undertaken this labour by supporting themselves through practical work. Even after the crisis was over by 1779, Moÿe declared that the virgins were eager to carry on baptizing in more distant places, because "in China there are always sick children in danger of death."[25]

It is, of course, remarkable that these virgins, presumably with bound feet, were able to travel such long distances in a society where women, especially unmarried women, were expected to stay at home. Moreover, according to Martiliat's *Rules for Virgins*, these unwed women were to lead "cloistered" lives, yet Moÿe was able and willing to employ them outside their family homes. It should also be noted that he aimed to create awareness in Europe of the high infant mortality rates in non-Christian China, insisting that it was the duty of "charitable souls" to provide material support for this endeavour to save the souls of children *in periculo mortis* through (often surreptitious) baptism. It has in fact been argued that his actions and appeals in the 1770s found concrete form in the establishment in 1843 of the Society of the Holy Childhood (Oeuvre de la Sainte-Enfance).[26]

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the virgins' valuable participation in the external apostolate was acknowledged by the Church authorities in Europe. When François Pottier MEP 梅若翰 (1726–1792), the vicar apostolic of Sichuan since 1767, voiced some concerns about the vulnerabilities to which the virgins were exposed as a result of Moÿe's activist approach, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) responded by recognizing the "institute of virgins" in 1784. Moreover, the rules concerning the formation of character, cultivation of a religious life and Christian virtues, especially chastity, were approved.[27] At the same time, these instructions prohibited virgins from preaching or reading at gatherings where men were present. In 1793, Propaganda Fide's instructions were communicated to the *chrétientés* of Sichuan in a pastoral letter by Pottier's successor, Jean-Didier de Saint-Martin (1743–1801). Further elaborated by the

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24 Georges Tavard, *L'experience de Jean-Martin Moye: mystique et mission, 1730–1793*, Paris: Beauchesne 1978, pp. 91-92.

25 Moÿe (later written Moyë), letter to the "charitable souls of Europe," dated 7 October 1779, reprinted in: *Annales de l'Oeuvre de la Sainte-Enfance* 10 (1858), pp. 183-184.

26 Georges Goyau, *Un devancier de l'œuvre de la Sainte-Enfance Jean-Martin Moÿe, missionnaire en Chine* (*1772–1783*), Paris: Editions "Alsatia" 1937). Note also that Moÿe was the founder of the Sisters of Providence (of Portieux) 普照修女會 in France in 1762. The first Sisters from this religious institute arrived in China in 1875 and were engaged in religious labour in the MEP mission in southern Manchuria.

27 "Instructio S. C. de Propaganda Fide ad Vicarium Apostolicum Sutchuen. Romae, 29 Aprilis 1784," in: *Collectanea S. C. de Propaganda Fide*, Romae 1907, Vol. 1, pp. 350-356, with the "De Regulis pro Societate Virginum Christianarum" on p. 351.

Sichuan Synod of 1803[28] and subsequently approved by Propaganda Fide in Rome, the rules for virgins were made applicable to all of China by decree in 1832. They remained, with certain later revisions, in force well into the twentieth century. Not only was the essential value of the virgins to the apostolate recognized, but these celibate women were often regarded as the true pillars of the faith in the scattered rural Catholic refuges during the difficult years of sporadic persecution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the process, they had achieved an unusual degree of religious authority and autonomy in various *chrétientés*.

Assertion of Missionary Control

The Catholic revival movements in Europe in the early decades of the nineteenth century in response to the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution also spawned a strong interest in overseas missions. Consequently, an initially modest but nevertheless steady stream of foreign priests began to arrive on the China mission fields. However, the resumption of missionary activities did not always proceed smoothly, because some of the by now relatively autonomous local Catholic communities considered the arrival of the European clergy an unwelcome intrusion. Nowhere was the conflict between foreign priests and Chinese clergy, catechists and lay leaders greater in the 1830s and 1840s than in the *padroado* (保教權) diocese of Nanjing. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the Jiangnan region of the lower Yangzi River was the most literate and prosperous region of China. Here, in the virtual absence for several decades of European priestly supervision, members of the wealthy Christian elite (rich peasants and merchants) had assumed leadership in Church affairs in their respective localities. Moreover, lay societies of Chinese Christians (confraternities or 聖會) had been introduced in the Shanghai-Songjiang area in earlier times.[29] Consequently, there was considerable resistance to the imposition of foreign missionary power in the 1840s. In particular, the *huizhang*, who were exercising complete financial autonomy, refused to yield it to the foreign priests.[30]

Serious tensions had already arisen in the 1830s between the tiny contingent of Portuguese Lazarists and the local Catholics in Jiangnan involving Church discipline and a complex set of other issues. However, the contest between the leaders of the local churches

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28 This synod was conducted in Chongqing by Bishop Gabriel-Taurin Dufresse MEP 徐德新 (1750–1815) together with 13 Chinese and one other European priest (2 Europeans and 6 Chinese, living in remoter parts of Sichuan, were not able to attend). For details, see Josef Metzler, *Die Synoden in China, Japan und Korea 1570–1931*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 1980, pp. 43-55. For an English translation of the 1784 Chinese text of the "Rules for the Institute of Virgins," as printed in 1910, see Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Early Qing Sichuan," "Appendix II," pp. 155-157.

29 For details, see Louis Pfister 费赖之 SJ, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine. 1552–1773*, Vol. 1: *XVI*^e^ *et XVII*^e^ *siècles*, Chang-hai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique 1932, pp. 226-227. For a detailed discussion of confraternities in China, see Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724*, Cambridge, Mass. – London: Harvard University Press 2007, Chapter 9: "A Good Method of Order."

30 Eric O. Hanson, "Political Aspects of Chinese Catholicism," in: James D. Whitehead – Yu-ming Shaw – Norman J. Girardot (eds.), *China and Christianity: Historical and Future Encounters*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 1979, p. 138.

and Count Ludovico de Besi 羅類思 (sometimes also 羅伯濟, 1805–1871)[31] in the mid-1840s was particularly acrimonious. De Besi was an Italian secular priest who had been sent to China by Propaganda Fide in 1833. In 1839 he became vicar apostolic of the newly established vicariate apostolic of Shandong and the Apostolic Administrator (代理主教) of what at least in theory was still the Portuguese *padroado* diocese of Nanjing.[32] David Mungello argues that Bishop De Besi "was a poor choice for this assignment. His arrogance, rigidity and difficult nature produced disagreements with all parties in China."[33] The ecclesiastical situation in Jiangnan was further complicated, against the background of the Holy See challenging Portugal's role in the ecclesiastical affairs of China, by the arrival in 1842 of a hurriedly assembled group of priests from the "new" Society of Jesus to replace the rather small number of Lazarist missionaries who had been trying to gain a foothold in the diocese in the 1830s. The prevailing situation was further complicated by the arrival of the Jesuit priests while the First Opium War was raging in the Jiangnan region. The local population would have been even less welcoming of missionaries. The foreign religion was, after all, still outlawed.[34] Two additional factors help us to understand the impending confrontation. Firstly, developments in Europe (the creation of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith 傳信會 in France in 1822 and the Society of the Holy Childhood 聖嬰會 in 1843 as effective fund-raising bodies) generated secure and regular income for the missionary enterprise in China. As a result, foreign priests were no longer dependent on support from and subordinate to influential Chinese Christian protectors. Secondly, with the introduction of the treaty system and the French Religious Protectorate in the wake of the First Opium War, missionaries were no longer forced to lead clandestine and precarious existences in China's hinterland. In other words, these developments encouraged the foreign priests to act more assertively in their attempts to impose European ecclesiastical models on China's Catholics.

In the mid-1840s, Bishop De Besi soon provoked bitter opposition of local Christians when he sought to impose missionary control over them. In his pastoral letters (主教勸論), he accused certain administrators (*huizhang* 會長) of having usurped temporal and even spiritual matters. The behaviour of the Catholic virgins of the Jiangnan region also came in for criticism. While they had done much to ensure the preservation of the

31 De Besis's given name is often rendered as "Lodovico," but I have adopted the spelling of the street named after him in his native city of Verona. In French texts he is called "Louis," which was then sometimes re-translated into Italian as "Luigi."

32 De Besi had entered the Chinese mainland in 1834 and worked as a missionary, subsequently as provicar, in the Hu-Guang (Hubei and Hunan) mission. On 3 September 1839 Pope Gregory XVI appointed De Besi vicar apostolic of the newly erected vicariate apostolic of Shandong and titular bishop of Canope; on 19 December 1839 he also appointed him Administrator of the diocese of Nanjing.

33 D. E. Mungello, "The Return of the Jesuits to China in 1841 and the Chinese Christian Backlash," in: *Sino-Western Cultural Relations Journal* 27 (2005), p. 13.

34 The Savoyard Jesuit Claude Gotteland (南格祿, 1803–1856) and the French Jesuit François Estève (艾方濟, 1807–1848) reached Wusong on 11 July 1842. The French Jesuit Benjamin Brueyre (sometimes Bruyère; 李秀芳, 1810–1880), who had remained on Zhoushan Island – which had been recaptured by British forces on 1 October 1841 – to act as chaplain among Irish soldiers, joined them on 22 October 1842. For a wider contextual discussion, see Jeremy Clarke, "The Chinese Rites Controversy's Long Shadow over the Restored Society of Jesus," in: Robert A. Maryks – Jonathan Wright (eds), *Jesuit Survival and Restoration: A Global History, 1773–1900*, Leiden: Brill 2015, pp. 315-330.

faith in the Christian communities, these unmarried women had achieved a degree of independence in the process. There had already been some criticism of the virgins in the late 1830s. Pierre Lavaissière (石伯鐸, 1813–1849), a French Lazarist in Jiangnan since 1839, was intent on eliminating night visits by the virgins and compelling them to show less familiarity with their relatives and neighbours. The newly arrived missionaries were particularly incensed by the virgins' liturgical and religious role in the *chrétientés*. In Songjiang a confrontation between missionaries and Chinese arose over virgin participation in religious services. "In more than one village, a virgin had usurped the administrator's functions; almost everywhere they conducted prayer chants at church, offered pious readings, admonished offenders."[35]

The local Christians, on the other hand, were outraged when Count de Besi insisted that the prayers in church were to be recited by the entire congregation, men and women alternately. They regarded this kind of public exchange between men and women morally inappropriate.[36] Indeed, as far as the virgins' involvement is concerned, Martiliat's Rule 14 of 1744 was very clear on this matter:

> *Whether in their home or in a public chapel, ... Virgins should pray in a place separated from men by a curtain. It is particularly the duty of men to chant prayers in a loud voice; therefore, the Virgins should not usurp that function. If, nevertheless, only relatives are present, brothers for example, this is not prohibited to them.*[37]

In Europe, the insistence on the seclusion of women religious had been determined by the Council of Trent two centuries earlier. According to Entenmann, "In this matter, in China, the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church accorded with Chinese norms."[38] Yet De Besi wanted to change these arrangements.

In response to the bishop's critical pastoral letters, the Jiangnan Christians issued a 38-page *Open Letter* (*Zhaoran gonglun* 昭然公論) on 30 January (Ash Wednesday) 1846 to voice their criticisms of the way in which De Besi and his Jesuit vicar-general (代牧) Claude Gotteland had administered the diocese. The Chinese priests, catechists and leading Christians reacted strongly to what they perceived to be interference in local religious

35 Joseph de la Servière, *Histoire de la Mission du Kiang-nan. Jésuites de la Province de France* (*Paris*) (*1840–1899*). Vol. 1: *Jusqu'à l'établissement d'un vicaire apostolique jésuite 1840–1856*, Zikawei, Shanghai, "Preface" dated 1914, p. 24. The Chinese text of De Besi's pastoral instructions (本主教羅思類) of ca. 1845 is available in Nicolas Standaert – Adrian Dudink – Huang Yi-Long – Chu Ping-Yi (eds.), *Xujiahui cangshulou Ming Qing tianzhujiao wenxian* 徐家匯藏書樓明清天主教文獻 [Chinese Christian Texts from the Zikawei Library], Taibei xian 臺北縣: Furen daxue shenxueyuan 輔仁大學神學院 1996, Vol. 5, pp. 2027-2038. Note that the characters in De Besi's Chinese name are arranged in a different sequence.

36 This particular contest between local Catholic interest groups, including Chinese priests, local *huizhang*, and virgins on the one hand and the bishop on the other, has been mentioned in several publications. See e.g. Eric O. Hanson, "Political Aspects of Chinese Catholicism," p. 139; and more recently D. E. Mungello, "The Return of the Jesuits to China in 1841," pp. 9-46. For details from a Jesuit perspective, see La Servière, Vol. 1, pp. 91-92; Mungello, *The Catholic Invasion of China: Remaking Chinese Christianity*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2015, Chapter 2: "Spiritual Domination by European Catholics in Nineteenth-Century China." A critical review of this last-mentioned work by Fr. Patrick Taveirne CICM, based partly on Professor Ku Weiying's corrective comments, is in *Tripod* 37 (Autumn 2017) 186, pp. 106-112. See also Paul Rule, "Restauration or New Creation? The Return of the Society of Jesus to China," in: Robert A. Maryks – Jonathan Wright (eds.), *Jesuit Survival and Restoration: A Global History, 1773–1900*, Leiden: Brill 2015, pp. 271-275.

37 Quoted in Entenmann, "Christian Virgins in Early Qing Sichuan," p. 151.

38 *Ibid*., p. 144.

affairs and a failure to understand Chinese culture by De Besi and the Jesuits. These and other criticisms, along with the point-by-point refutation by Gotteland's *Wubang lun* 誣謗論 [On Slander], have been discussed in some detail by both Huang Xiaojuan and David Mungello.[39] My approach is focused on the failure of the European priests to comprehend the importance of the strict separation of the sexes in Chinese society – and hence in the Chinese Church. Whereas the newly arrived Jesuits could be excused for their unawareness of this delicate issue, it is more difficult to understand why De Besi, who had already been in China for a decade or so, insisted that both men and women take part in "chanting the liturgy" (念經) in church. It is, therefore, plausible that the Chinese clergy criticized the bishop and Gotteland so severely in this regard, accusing them of treating the Chinese like animals.[40] While hyperbole is a characteristic aspect of the traditionally adversarial nature of Chinese dispute management, it is nevertheless easy to see why the problematic treatment of the Catholic virgins by the Europeans received such harsh criticism.

Still, there is reason to believe that the *Open Letter* and Gotteland's refutation do not fully reveal the true nature of the dispute between the Jiangnan Catholics and De Besi. It can be assumed that new, incriminating facts, recently discovered by Paul Mariani SJ in the Jesuit archives in Rome, had a bearing on the Christians' hostile attitude toward the bishop. The archives indicate that while Joseph de la Servière was writing his *Histoire de la mission du Kiangnan*, he decided to leave out of the book concerning De Besi's behaviour.

> *Servière admitted that de Besi was an ""administrator," a "diplomat," and an "apostle," yet he was also guilty of "committing grave faults against morals, especially with the virgins," even those from the "best Christian families," and the events risked schism as the Chinese priests refused him obedience.*[41]

When De Besi left for Europe on 21 November 1847, never to return to China, the Jesuit missionaries had the Jiangnan field to themselves.

It can be argued that this acrimonious exchange in the 1840s was also a power struggle between influential local Catholic interests and the missionaries' insistence on imposing European hierarchical ecclesiastic structures on the Church in China. At the same time, the language of the *Open Letter* also reveals a sense of Chinese cultural superiority. This deeply entrenched self-confidence among Jiangnan's Catholics would, however, be shattered a few years later, along with the local Church autonomy that had emerged during the previous century when China's Christians were largely left to their own devices. The devastations during Taiping Rebellion in the Lower Yangzi Region caused great hardship among the Catholic believers, making them more dependent on the support of the French

39 Huang Xiaojuan, "Christian Communities and Alternative Devotions in China, 1780–1860," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University 2006; Mungello, "The Return of the Jesuits to China in 1841." *Zhaoran gonglun* and *Wubang lun* have been included in Standaert *et al.* (eds.), *Xujiahui cangshulou Ming Qing tianzhujiao wenxian*, pp. 2039-2077 and 2079-2119.

40 Mungello,"The Return of the Jesuits to China in 1841," p. 37.

41 Paul Mariani SJ, "The Phoenix Rises from its Ashes: The Restoration of the Jesuit Shanghai Mission," in: Robert A. Maryks – Jonathan Wright (eds.), *Jesuit Survival and Restoration: A Global History, 1773–1900*, Leiden: Brill 2015, pp. 304-305.

Jesuits. Furthermore, the treaty system and the French Religious Protectorate created conditions that were quite different from those that had existed before the First Opium War.

Subordination of the Virgins

One significant consequence of the treaty arrangements, and especially of the French version of the Beijing Convention of 1860, was the fact that the Catholic Church in China became visible. In the century and a half before the treaties, Christianity had kept a low profile in the countryside. Now, with a gradual return to urban centres, missionary power could be displayed quite prominently in the form of churches, schools, orphanages, dispensaries, hospitals and convents. The last-named institutions are of particular relevance to this paper, for it now became possible not only to bring European sisters to the Middle Kingdom[42] but also to encourage communal religious life for Chinese virgins. More favourable conditions in mid-nineteenth century China saw an increase in the conversions of non-Christians. According to La Servière, there was also a significant rise in the number of celibate women who consecrated their lives to serving God and the missions.[43] The missionaries viewed this development with ambivalence. On the one hand, in consequence of the strict custom of segregating the sexes in traditional Chinese society, they appreciated the virgins' desire not to marry but to remain celibate and devote themselves to the indispensable apostolate among Chinese women. On the other hand, the foreign priests were concerned that most virgins, especially those in the remoter rural parts of the country, were living in a "pagan" environment, without solid religious formation, regular spiritual guidance and sacerdotal supervision – as well as without sacraments. As late as 1880, some rather negative opinions were voiced at the first regional synods in China, as summarized from the synodal reports by Gaetano Cardinal Alimonda (1818–1891). The virgins were accused of being quarrelsome, noisy and disobedient, as well as "proud, ignorant and some of them cause much scandal" by roaming about, giving rise to the rumour among non-Christians that they were the priests' concubines.[44]

Given the virgins' relative independence, religious initiatives and weak corporate identity, it is not surprising that from around the middle of the nineteenth century the European clergy promoted the idea of establishing Chinese religious sisterhoods to cultivate their religious lives and establish proper ecclesiastical control over them. There were, however, other factors that encouraged the formation of communal bodies. For one thing, we

42 The first foreign missionary sisters came to China in 1848, namely the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres (沙爾德聖保綠女修會). In the same year the first Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (仁愛修女會) arrived in Macao, but the obstructive Portuguese authorities forced them to transfer to Ningbo in 1852. In subsequent decades women religious from other European congregations settled in various treaty ports from where they spread to major stations in the interior.

43 For details on motives, background and procedures for the acceptance of virgins, as well as regulations concerning vows, see Tiedemann, "Controlling the Virgins," for the modern period. For the pre-modern period, see the comprehensive work by Zhao Huaqing, *Die Missionsgeschichte Chinas*, especially pp. 228-235.

44 Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide, Ponente l'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signor Cardinale Gaetano Alimonda. Ristretto con sommario e voto sulle deliberazione Sinodali dei Vicari Apostolici delle cinque regione ecclesiastiche dell'imperio Cinesi. Dicembre 1881, Voto 94, quoted in Johannes Beckmann SMB, *Die katholische Missionsmethode in China in neuester Zeit* (*1842–1912*). *Geschichtliche Untersuchung über Arbeitsweisen, ihre Hindernisse und Erfolge*, Immensee: Verlag des Missionshauses Bethlehem 1931, p. 85.

should not underestimate the possibility that some young Catholic women, including virgins, actually desired to live in such environments. At the same time, we should not forget that from the middle of the nineteenth century, the Holy See increasingly insisted on the formation of genuinely indigenous churches, including the creation of religious institutes. In any case, celibate Chinese women also had the option to join European congregations of women religious – where this was possible.

One of the earliest and somewhat unusual proposals to "regularize" the religious life of virgins was put forward by the Italian Jesuit Luigi Maria Sica 薛孔昭 (1814–1895) in 1855. Since so many young girls had been abandoned or saved from female infanticide and raised in orphanages by dedicated virgins, he wanted to turn them into instruments of conversion. Initially, a dozen or so girls, aged around twelve years, were assembled at the former Jesuit residence of Hengtang 横塘 in the Kunshan 昆山 area, where they received a basic education, were required – without taking vows – to live a *vita communis* in what became known as the Shengmuyuan 聖母院 and observe a rule of discipline that had been drawn up by Sica with the approbation of Bishop Francesco Maresca 趙方濟 (1806–1855) who was a member of the Congregation of the Holy Family of Jesus Christ in Naples, and the Jesuit Visitor Pierre Fournier 伏伯祿 (1802–1855).[45] Four virgins were to live with them under the same rule and discipline.[46] In other words, the institution became the precursor of an indigenous religious congregation, which later became known as the Association of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin or Présentandines 聖母獻堂會 under the supervision of French sisters from the Helpers of the Holy Souls (Auxiliatrices des Ames du Purgatoire) 拯望會 who had arrived in Shanghai in 1867.[47]

Whereas the Jesuits were able to organize indigenous religious institutions in the relative safety of the foreign concessions of Shanghai or in its vicinity, similar efforts in the interior of China carried a greater degree of risk. The work of Paul-Hubert Perny MEP 童文獻 (1818–1907) in Guizhou is, therefore, noteworthy. In the 1850s he was much involved in producing rules and regulations for Chinese priests and catechists (*ministres*). At the same time, he realized that in China only women were in a position to bring the teachings of Christ to other women. Thus, the virgins – of whom there were twelve in Guizhou in 1856 – were an obvious choice for the task of "teaching them the prayers, to mould their Christian life by extended instruction, by a kind of re-education of their thinking, their habits, their customs."[48] Yet because the virgins, with a few exceptions, were living in isolation with their families and hence rather ignorant and essentially incapable of teaching in schools for girls, Perny decided in 1857 to assemble them in one single convent at Guiyang for dedicated training. This model community was intended to be a kind of nursery that

45 La Servière, Vol. 1, p. 334. The Shengmuyuan was later moved to Xujiahui 徐家匯. Fournier resided in Shanghai from 18 August 1854 to 21 November 1855. Note also that Maresca's Chinese name is given as 馬自修 in: *Elenchus Alumnorum. Decreta et documenta quæ spectant ad Collegium Sacræ Familiæ Napolis*, Shanghai: Typographia Missionis Catholicæ 1917, p. 25.

46 Sica, Jiangnan, 8 April 1855, *Annales de l'Œuvre de la Sainte-Enfance* 10 (1858), p. 218.

47 Joseph de la Servière SJ, "Les Vierges Présentandines du Kiang-Nan," in: *Relations de Chine* VI (1918–1921), pp. 158-164.

48 Adrien Launay, *Histoire des missions de Chine. Mission du Kouy-Tcheou*, Vannes: Lafolye frères 1907–1908, Vol. 1, p. 428.

would in time nourish the entire province.[49] He prepared a rough outline of the rules he wanted the virgins to follow. They trained and worshipped together similar to the practices in the European religious establishments. No Christian of the one or other sex was allowed to enter the interior of the community without permission of the superiors. He expected that the expenses would be covered by the income from their work and dowries and that any surplus could be used to expand the work.[50]

This was, however, no easy task because anti-Christian persecutions were particularly severe in a province that was experiencing prolonged turmoil during the so-called "Miao" Rebellion (1854–1873). Matters were complicated because the virgins were expected to work among the Miao 苗 and Zhongjia 狆家 (now called Bouyei 布依) ethnic minorities. Indeed, one MEP priest, several seminarists and catechists, including virgins lost their life during these turbulent times. Among the martyrs canonized in 2000 were two virgins who were killed in Guizhou: Agatha Lin Zhao 林昭 (1817–1858) was executed on 28 January 1858; Lucia Yi Zhenmei 易貞美 (1815–1862), a virgin from Sichuan, was beheaded in Guiyang on 19 February 1862 at the behest of the local anti-Christian military commander Tian Xingshu 田興恕. Under these conditions the elevation of the "institute of virgins" was much retarded. Louis-Simon Faurie MEP (1824–1871), the vicar apostolic of Guizhou, reported to Propaganda Fide in 1865 that attempts had been made on several occasions to encourage the virgins to lead communal lives and assemble them in a convent. Although this project could not be realized for a variety of reasons, in time the young women were required to spend two or three years in a novitiate before they were given the title of virgin.[51] Given the insecurity in Guizhou as well as its remoteness, the MEP mission failed to attract any European women religious to the province in the nineteenth century. Thus, the virgins did not receive the necessary guidance and supervision. It was not until 1922 that the first group of foreign sisters arrived in the province, namely the Canadian Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Angels (天神之后傳教女修會). They assumed the direction and formation of the teaching virgins of the Society of the Sacred Heart (聖心院) which had been founded by Émile Cousin MEP (1877–1936) at Guiyang 貴陽 in 1915. Later the Canadian sisters also supervised the Sisters of the Blessed Agatha Lin which had been established in 1937.

The experience in Guizhou is indicative of the slow transition from the "institute of virgins" to the creation of female institutes of diocesan right in the hinterland of the Qing Empire. Since the development of conventual life relied on the supervision of European religious institutes, the creation of female Chinese congregations was more advanced in eastern China and in the treaty ports along the Yangzi River. Thus, in the Lazarist missions of Zhili (now Hebei), with the presence of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (仁愛修女會), the creation by Bishop Louis-Gabriel Delaplace CM 田嘉壁 (1820–1884) of the Chinese Religious of Saint Joseph (若瑟會; Josephines) in Beijing in 1872 is an example of dynamic development. The primary apostolate was religious instruction of

49 Adrien Launay, *Histoire des missions de Chine*, Vol. 1, p. 428.

50 *Ibid*., pp. 428-429. The text of the French version of the "Rule," based on Martiliat's *Rules* of 1744, is on pp. 429-433.

51 Adrien Launay, *Histoire des missions de Chine*, Vol. 2, pp. 529-530.

women and subsequently the running of dispensaries. This institute of diocesan right for indigenous sisters became a model that subsequently spread to other vicariates in northern China.

The arrival of new missionaries, including from the newly-established missionary congregations (Milan Foreign Missions – now PIME 米蘭外方傳教會; Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary 聖母聖心會; Society of the Divine Word 聖言會) resulted in the division and subdivision of existing vicariates apostolic. With greater accessibility of China's interior, European and North American women religious established themselves at major mission stations throughout the country during the early decades of the twentieth century. The increase of ecclesiastical circumscriptions and the presence of more female missionaries produced a proliferation of Chinese sisterhoods dedicated to conventual life. Among these, the Little Sisters of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus (德來小妹妹會) are surely particularly interesting. Inspired by the Belgian priest Vincent Lebbe 雷鳴遠 (1877–1940), fifteen Chinese Sisters of St. Joseph adopted the name Little Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus in 1928. A year later, with the authorization of Bishop Melchior Sun Dezhen CM 孫德楨 (1869–1951), they erected their mother house at Anguo 安國, Hebei. The institute combined pastoral ministry with contemplative spirituality, emphasizing Marian devotion. Subsequently a small group of Theresian Sisters established themselves at Shuiqu 水渠 near Sangzhen 桑鎮 (Xingping 興平 county) in the Prefecture Apostolic of Chowchih (Shaanxi), in charge of a dispensary and a girls' school. The prefecture had been entrusted to Chinese secular clergy in 1932. Another group came to Luoyang (Henan). Note that the Luoyang sisters were called Soeurs de Ste Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus, or Yingdehui 嬰德會. The Theresian Sisters were also involved in the formation of Sisters of Our Lady of China (中華聖母會) that had been founded in Yanggu 陽穀, Shandong, by Bishop (later Cardinal) Thomas Tian SVD 田耕莘 (1890–1967) in 1940. Since Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS; 聖神婢女傳教會) were not available to provide spiritual guidance, the bishop turned to the indigenous Little Sisters of Saint Therese. They sent a "moderator" and a novitiate mistress. But it seems that they did not perform satisfactorily. On 6 January 1941 Bishop Tian opened the novitiate at Zhaocheng 朝城. This date is now regarded as the official founding date of the congregation. The work was, however, severely disrupted during the Anti-Japanese War. In 1945 all sisters were driven out by the Communists. Bishop Thomas Niu Huiqing 牛會卿 (1895–1973) gathered them and started to continue to work with them in South China. Eventually he fled with them to Macao in 1948. From there they went to Taiwan in the early 1950s and established their motherhouse in Chiayi 嘉義. The congregation is now an international diocesan religious institute of consecrated life, dedicated to apostolic mission work.

When the Chinese "institute of virgins" had grown to a reasonable size by the middle of the nineteenth century, pressure was exerted on the virgins to form indigenous religious congregations. Certainly, in the late nineteenth century, in the course of their work with foreign sisters in dispensaries, hospitals, schools or orphanages, some Catholic virgins expressed the desire to live in a communal environment. However, by no means all celibate women were willing to accept the discipline of institutionalized religious life. During her research in the MEP archives, Dr Li Ji discovered letters from three sisters of the

Du 杜 family in southern Manchuria, written to their former local priest Dominique-Maurice Pourquié MEP 林貌理 (1812–1871) who had returned to France in 1870. They were complaining about the future bishop Joseph-André Boyer 包若瑟 (1824–1887) who had established a convent of the Sacred Heart of Mary (聖母聖心會) for Chinese women religious and insisted that the Du sisters join it. However, the three virgins did not want to enter the convent because they were not willing to observe the rules. Moreover, an active religious life did not suit them. They preferred a contemplative role, something that virgins had traditionally been expected to adopt within the confines of family households. Consequently, they were prepared to join the Discalced Carmelite Nuns (加爾默羅跣足女修會) who had come from France to establish a convent in Shanghai in 1869 and were willing to accept Chinese women.[52]

The reluctance to join a convent that was intended to become involved in apostolic works was no doubt based on personal preferences. We should, however, not underestimate the cultural differences between Chinese believers and foreign missionaries that persisted and were even aggravated by the changing political situation and the growth of national consciousness in China after 1900. Especially after the 1911 Revolution, tensions between Chinese and foreign priests became more pronounced, often focusing on disputes over missionary power.[53] But as the examples from Shanxi indicate, Catholic virgins, too, became involved in such struggles. In early 1913 the Italian Franciscan Ugolino Arcari 雷驚 (警) 世 (1885–1963) spoke of a “revolution” in the orphanage at the important rural station of Dong’ergou 洞兒溝 over control by the newly arrived foreign sisters and the pressure on the local virgins to work as evangelists. As Henrietta Harrison points out,

> *The new emphasis on evangelism brought huge changes in the lives of these women. Evangelism required a drastic reordering of their understanding of Christian life, from an emphasis on prayer and personal salvation to a more outward-looking focus; many found the transition very hard.*[54]

Yet there was more to the discontent in the orphanage. The unhappiness among the virgins stemmed also from the attempts by the newly arrived European sisters, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (瑪利亞方濟各傳教女修會), “to position themselves as the religious superiors of the Chinese virgins.” The Chinese women objected to the French mother superior’s insistence on obedience and humility and consequently provoked a great deal of conflict.

> *Ultimately, the virgins succeeded where the Chinese priests had always failed, presumably because as women they were not a threat to the male church hierarchy:*

52 For a detailed analysis of the letters and background discussion, see Li Ji, “Becoming Faithful: Christianity, Literacy, and Female Consciousness in Northeast China, 1830–1930,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan 2009, chapter 8.

53 In this connection, the activities of the Belgian Lazarist priest Vincent Lebbe 雷鳴遠 (1877-1940) in support of the Chinese clergy in the face of French missionary opposition come to mind.

54 Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2013, p. 133.

> *over the next few years the foreign mother superior left Shanxi altogether and a new Chinese religious order was set up for the sworn virgins.*[55]

Presumably, this is a reference to the Chinese Sisters of Christian Doctrine (貞女傳信教授會) who were founded by Bishop Agapito Fiorentini OFM 鳳朝瑞 (1866–1941) in 1922. They directed schools, dispensaries, homes for the aged, and orphanages.

While increasing numbers of celibate Chinese Catholic women were brought together in indigenous religious communities, some of the active foreign missionary institutes considered accepting Chinese women into their congregations. However, certain Western priests objected to the creation of hybrid communities because it would impede the development of a genuine indigenous church. Because Chinese sisters joining Western religious institutes were expected to wear European habits, one Capuchin friar referred to them as religious "with crippled feet and European bonnets."[56] The Steyl missionary Georg Maria Stenz 薛田资 (1869–1928) felt that Chinese sisters in foreign religious garb would be out of place in Chinese society. They should wear a distinct form of Chinese dress.[57] Actually, he was strongly opposed to the presence of ill-prepared foreign women religious in China.

> *What are the house Sisters to do out here who can only cook and wash and sweep well? What are the Sisters to do who come out in older years and have never in their life learned another language? Why* [*do we need*] *these half-trained Sisters who know a little about teaching, about medical care, about this and that?*[58]

Stenz is no doubt exaggerating somewhat, but further research is required to determine whether the Western sisters in general at that time had the expertise, temperament and preparation for work in a markedly different cultural environment.

As the decision of the American Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (主顧修女會) indicates, some foreign women's institutes felt that the cultural differences between Western women religious and Chinese virgins were too great to accept the latter into their congregation at Kaifeng. One Providence Sister of the Kaifeng mission in the mid-1920s insisted on piety as a decisive and sufficient condition. This was, however, rejected by the influential Sister Marie Gratia 蓋夏 (secular name: Josephine Luking; 1885–1964) because the virgins (colloquially called *shouzhen guniang* 守貞姑娘)

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55 Harrison, *The Missionary's Curse and Other Tales*, p. 134.

56 Lorenz Bollig OFMCap, "Eine Lebens- und Gewissensfrage der Chinamission," in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 16 (1926), p. 65.

57 Georg Maria Stenz SVD, "Zur Missionsmethode und –lage in China," in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 15 (1925), p. 201.

58 *Ibid*., p. 205 note 17. The debate whether Chinese women should join European congregations or form their own indigenous religious communities arose in connection with the foundation of the Oblates of the Holy Family (聖家修女會) by Bishop Augustin Henninghaus SVD 韓寧鎬 (1862–1939) at Yanzhou 兗州, South Shandong, in 1910. For other aspects of the debate and a brief history of the Oblates, see R. G. Tiedemann, "The Formation of Chinese Diocesan Religious Congregations and Sisterhoods in the Late Qing: Some Preliminary Observations on an Elusive Phenomenon," in: Rachel Lu Yan – Philip Vanhaelemeersch (eds.), *Silent Force: Native Converts in the Catholic China Mission*, Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, K.U. Leuven 2009, pp. 49-56.

> *were too poorly educated and too physically handicapped by their bound feet to be able to perform the task each member of the Providence Sisters, as a teaching order, was expected to contribute to the Society.*[59]

According to Maria Jaschok, this was an issue common in many missions, namely whether the foreign Sisters should adapt to the local culture or continue to live in China according to the customs of the motherhouse in the West (in this case the United States).[60] The Providence Sisters decided, therefore, to establish a Chinese society, distinct from the foreign religious community. As one American Sister later explained:

> *There seems to be an ingrained hatred of foreigners and their ways in the Chinese. In their own Communities they would be happy with their own customs of housing, clothes, food, etc. The foreigners would be healthier and happier not to have to go "native."*[61]

It was, therefore, decided to establish the indigenous Providence Sister-Catechists in 1929, under the protection of the Italian vicar apostolic Noè Giuseppe Tacconi PIME 潭維新 (1873–1942). Still, where the foreign and Chinese had to share the same premises, the American Providence Sisters found it difficult to adapt to local customs and especially to the more primitive Chinese living conditions.

> *Cleanliness of the kitchen and cooking utensils, observation of hygiene as well as the tradition of eating together and paying attention to table etiquette all became matters for reflection and, to a certain extent, accounted for the practice of segregated food preparation and eating.*[62]

While cultural differences were difficult to overcome and relations between Chinese and foreign sisters were sometimes less than harmonious, many foreign women's congregations nevertheless admitted Chinese vocations into their ranks. It would obviously be tedious to list all the Western congregations that accepted Chinese women.[63] Two somewhat unusual examples may suffice. The Discalced Carmelites from France had accepted Chinese women following their arrival in Shanghai in February 1869. It is to be noted that the Carmelite Nuns were the first of the few contemplative orders to establish monasteries in China. Local vocations came mainly from fervent Shanghai families who had been Christian for several generations. The rather more rigorous religious observance as well as the penitential, solitary and contemplative life of Carmel is particularly noteworthy. Perhaps it is not surprising that for several of the first Chinese postulants the life of Carmel was too hard. They had to give it up and return to their families or accept a less arduous religious

59 Maria Jaschok – Shui Jingjun, *Women, Religion, and Space in China: Islamic Mosques & Daoist Temples, Catholic Convents & Chinese Virgins*, New York: Routledge 2011, p. 113. The first American sisters arrived in Kaifeng in 1920.

60 *Ibid*.

61 Quoted in Jaschok – Shui, *Women, Religion, and Space in China*, p. 115.

62 *Ibid*., p. 118. In 1948, some of the Catechist Sisters went with the American Sisters of Providence from Kaifeng to Taiwan where they became an independent religious congregation in 1962. They are now known as Missionary Sisters of Providence 主顧傳教修女會 (MSP), with convents in Taipei, Taichung, Shalu, and Chiayi.

63 The number of professed Chinese sisters and postulants in each foreign congregation of women religious can be gleaned from *Les Missions de Chine*, Seizième Année (1940–1941), Shanghai 1942.

observance. Only those who had shown that they could follow all the customary exercises of French monasteries were admitted to the novitiate.[64]

The other unusual example concerns American Franciscan Sisters entering a Chinese sisterhood. The Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Family (Dubuque), who had arrived in the Vicariate Apostolic of Chowtsun 周村監牧區 (Shandong) in 1931, were prepared to accept Chinese vocations from the start. When the American and Chinese Franciscan Sisters were forced to leave for the United States because of the Communist advance in Shandong, Sister M. Leola 李芝芳 (Theresa Catherine Pottebaum; 1893–1979) and Sister M. Hubertine (Cecilia Sadie Rempe; 1899–1994) decided to stay in China and with their Shandong postulants. They were accepted by the Franciscan Sisters of Our Sorrowful Mother (聖母痛苦方濟女修會), a Chinese religious congregation of diocesan right that the Italian vicar apostolic Raffaele Angelo Palazzi 柏長青 OFM (1886–1961) had founded at Hengyang (Hunan) in 1939. Having escaped from mainland China and spent some time in Hong Kong and Macao, the congregation left for the United States in 1952. This American-Chinese congregation is now known as the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Sorrows (聖母痛苦方濟傳教女修會), with administrative headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon and missions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, British Columbia, and the United States. Apostolic works include catechetics, retreat ministry, education, pastoral ministry, and care of the sick and underprivileged.[65]

The creation of Chinese religious congregations was at least in part an attempt to regularize the lives of Catholic virgins. Yet at the end of the missionary era, the so-called "institute of virgins" still played an important part, especially in rural China. The Catholic virgins continued to undertake many essential tasks of the rural apostolate: providing basic medical care, educating the poor, teaching about Christ, and assisting the clergy. Several missionary accounts are full of praise of these zealous unwed Christian women, yet the foreign priests also tried to provide guidance, supervision and control. In certain vicariates strict apostolic "Rules for Virgins" were produced and annual retreats organized for them.[66] Still, because these unwed women did not live in convents but were scattered across particular jurisdictions, they had achieved a fair degree of autonomy. As Maria Jaschok has found in Kaifeng, the virgins interacted with the Sisters on occasion, but very few entered the Kaifeng-based convent of the Chinese Sister Catechists. Most chose to do their religious work away from the Providence Sisters, continuing their lives as celibate women in the local tradition of *shouzhen guniang*.[67] Indeed, as was the case in the Jiangnan region in the early 1840s, the intrusion of foreigners into the established patterns of religious life in Catholic villages could provoke tensions in later decades as well. Writing from the large rural mission station of Poli 坡里, South Shandong, one European sister hinted that there had been friction between the established virgins and the newly arrived Missionary Sisters

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64 Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *Christian Monks on Chinese Soil: A History of Monastic Missions to China*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2016, "A Garden of Tiny Flowers in Chinese Soil" in Chapter 2.

65 For historical details, see Donalda Kehoe OSF, *The China Story: Franciscan Ministry, 1931–1949*, Dubuque, Iowa: Sisters of St. Francis 2010, pp. 175-207.

66 For positive reports in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Tiedemann, "A Necessary Evil," pp. 96-98.

67 Jaschok *et al.*, p. 106.

Servants of the Holy Spirit from Europe shortly after 1900: "Relations with the Chinese virgins are now also much better than in the beginning."[68] At least initially, certain cultural differences were apparent between the European sisters and the Chinese virgins. For instance, the foreign sisters complained that virgins disturbed their observance of clausura (i.e., the privacy of cloistered life).[69] The practice of foot binding represents another aspect of cultural incongruence: at the beginning of the twentieth century the virgins in charge of the Poli orphanage for girls continued to insist on binding the girls' feet, something the German sisters had to reluctantly accept.[70] In the words of Louis-Marie Kervyn CICM, the consecrated unwed women continued to be a "necessary evil."[71]

Conclusion

It was not my intention to present a comprehensive history of Chinese women religious. Much more space and detailed archival research would be required to produce a full and definitive account. The records show, however, that the long and sometimes tortuous road toward the creation of indigenous institutes of women religious did not produce any fully recognized indigenous female congregations before 1949.[72] Instead, a great variety of Chinese Catholic religious communities of women had come into being, ranging from rather loose pious unions of virgins to a few properly constituted institutes of diocesan right, on the verge of full papal approbation. The transitional process from the one to the other awaits further investigation. Thus, in each particular case of the seventy or so Chinese Catholic sisterhoods[73] there is a need to establish whether the specific association in question had a common uniform habit, a name or title in Chinese, and fulfilled other requirements demanded by the Sacred Congregation of the Affairs of Religious (now known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life) in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, in some cases nothing much is known about certain associations.[74] It is clear, though, that Chinese Catholic women who wanted to lead celibate lives had several options: they could join pious unions of virgins, many of which

68 Sister Blandina (Anna Mairon) SSpS to Mother Superior Theresia, Poli, 20 October 1905, quoted in Richard Hartwich SVD, *Steyler Missionare in China.* Vol. II: *Bischof A. Henninghaus ruft Steyler Schwestern 1904–1910*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, p. 197.

69 Sister Dolorosa (Luise Schotenröhr) SSpS to Mother Theresia, Yanzhou, 24 October 1905, in: Hartwich, *Steyler Missionare in China*, Vol. II, p. 132.

70 Sister Blandina to Mother Theresia, Poli, 12 November 1906, in Hartwich, *Steyler Missionare in China*, Vol. II, p. 199.

71 Louis-Marie Kervyn, *Méthode de l'apostolat de Chine*, Hongkong: Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Etrangères 1911, p. 559.

72 In other words, during the missionary era in China none had received a completely positive approbation (starting with the decree of commendation or *decretum laudis*, followed by the decree of pontifical approbation of the congregation as well as approbation of its constitution) to make them institutes of pontifical right.

73 For a rather basic description of the female Chinese religious unions that could be identified, see R.G. Tiedemann, *Reference Guide to Christian Missionary Societies in China: From the 16th to the 20th Century*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe 2009, Part III: "Roman Catholic: Chinese Religious Communities of Women (Associations of Diocesan Right)."

74 R.G. Tiedemann, "Catholic Religious Communities of Chinese Women," in: idem (ed.), *Handbook of Christianity in China, Vol. Two: 1800–Present*, Leiden: Brill 2010, pp. 587-599.

progressed into congregations of diocesan right; they could join foreign religious communities of women or they could remain unaffiliated and celibate in their family household. Indeed, the traditional "institute of virgins" continued to be an important feature of the Catholic Church in China right up to the end of the missionary era.

After 1949, some of the mainland Chinese sisterhoods found new homes in Hong Kong and Taiwan and subsequently joined the international community of Catholic women religious as societies of apostolic life, such as, for example, the Missionary Sisters Oblates of the Holy Family (聖家獻女傳教修會),[75] founded in 1910 in southern Shandong, or the Sisters Announcers of the Lord (顯主女修會), established in the Salesian mission in Guangdong in 1936. Perhaps more intriguing is the reappearance of female religious associations on the mainland, many of them operating under names that are familiar from the pre-1949 period.[76] Thus, the Oblates of the Holy Family are present again in Yanggu county, Shandong. However, as we know from other aspects of Chinese history, identical names do not necessarily imply continuity of organization. Perhaps even more interesting is the adoption of institutional names by mainland religious associations that suggest a link with European or North American female religious institutes. Of course, in China today, there are officially only diocesan communities of women religious, because no national or international congregations have been officially registered. Here, too, much more research is required. In conclusion, I must admit that the above rather brief outline obviously reflects my rather inadequate understanding of an important religious phenomenon.

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75 Wu Ziqing 吳子清 (ed.), *Tianzhujiao Shengjia xian nü chuanjiao xiuhui chuanghui 96 zhounian qian Tai 50 zhounian jinian tekan* 天主教聖家獻女傳教修會創會 96 周年遷台 50 周年紀念特刊 [Special issue on the 96th anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of Missionary Sisters Oblates of the Holy Family and the 50th anniversary of the move to Taiwan], Taibei: Tianzhujiao shengjia xian nü chuanjiao xiuhui 2006.

76 On the reappearance of religious congregations, see Jeroom Heyndrickx CICM, "Le rétablissement de congrégations religieuses dans la République populaire de Chine," in: *Courrier Verbiest* 13 (December 2001), pp. 18-21; Beatrice Leung – Patricia Wittberg, "Catholic Religious Orders in China: Adaptation and Power," in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (March 2004) 1, pp. 67-82.