

# Strategic Visuality and Cross-Cultural Translation: Localization and Collaborative Networks in the Illustrations of the *Song nianzhu guicheng*

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**Abstract:** This article takes the late-Ming Catholic illustrated book *Song nianzhu guicheng* (誦念珠規程) as a case study to examine its strategic localization at the level of visual imagery. By comparing its adapted illustrations with their source in Nadal's *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, it reveals how the Jesuits, while maintaining theological consistency, promoted the visual translation of Christian imagery through selective adjustments in composition, setting, and symbolism. This process rested upon the theological oversight of the Jesuits, the cultural mediation of Chinese literati, and the technical execution of local artisans. The study argues that such modifications were not acts of passive compromise, but rather instances of creative cross-cultural adaptation, reflecting the interaction between Catholic doctrine and Confucian notions such as "zhenjie" (貞潔 chastity). In this way, the *Song nianzhu guicheng* not only testifies to the exchange and transformation of religious art between China and the West in the late Ming, but also provides a new perspective for understanding the visual strategies of Christianity's accommodation in China.

**Keywords:** Jesuit art; late-Ming woodcuts; cultural adaptation; localization; Marian iconography.

## ES Visualidad estratégica y traducción intercultural: procesos de localización y redes de colaboración en las ilustraciones del *Song nianzhu guicheng*

**Resumen:** Este artículo toma como estudio de caso el libro ilustrado católico de finales de la dinastía Ming *Song nianzhu guicheng* (誦念珠規程), con el fin de examinar su localización estratégica en el plano de la imaginería visual. Al comparar sus ilustraciones adaptadas con su fuente en el *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* de Nadal, se revela cómo los jesuitas, manteniendo la coherencia teológica, promovieron la traducción visual de las imágenes cristianas mediante ajustes selectivos en la composición, el entorno y la simbología. Este proceso se sustentó en la supervisión teológica de los jesuitas, la mediación cultural de los letreados chinos y la ejecución técnica de los artesanos locales. El estudio sostiene que tales modificaciones no fueron actos de compromiso pasivo, sino más bien ejemplos de una adaptación creativa transcultural, que reflejan la interacción entre la doctrina católica y nociones confucianas como zhenjie (貞潔, castidad). De este modo, el *Song nianzhu guicheng* no solo da testimonio del intercambio y la transformación del arte religioso entre China y Occidente a finales de los Ming, sino que también ofrece una nueva perspectiva para comprender las estrategias visuales de la acomodación del cristianismo en China.

**Palabras clave:** arte jesuita; xilogravías de finales de Ming; adaptación cultural; localización; iconografía mariana.

**Sumario:** 1. Introducción. 2. Comparación inductiva. 3. Análisis de imágenes centrales. 4. Consideraciones finales. 5. Referencias bibliográficas.

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## 1. Introduction

From the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, with the expansion of the Age of Discovery, cultural exchanges between Europe and East Asia gradually intensified. In this historical process, the Jesuits played an exceptionally important role as cultural intermediaries. As one of the earliest Catholic missionary orders to enter inland China in a systematic way, the Jesuits not only engaged in intellectual exchange in fields such as philosophy and astronomy, but also deliberately employed images as a cross-linguistic medium for religious transmission. *Song nianzhu guicheng* (誦念珠規程)<sup>1</sup> emerged as a highly representative work within this visual strategy of propagation. Scholarly consensus holds that the book was compiled by the late Ming missionary João da Rocha (羅儒望) around 1619.<sup>2</sup> Originally designed as a devotional manual to guide the faithful in meditating on the Marian mysteries, it contains fifteen woodcut prints, most of which were adapted from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*<sup>3</sup> by the Spanish Jesuit Jerónimo Nadal.

Historical evidence indicates that *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* had reached China no later than 1605. In the same year, Matteo Ricci, in a letter to Father Marcelo in Rome, reported that he had received a copy of Nadal's image collection, which he regarded as essential for missionary work in China. Ricci therefore requested additional copies and entrusted the book to Father Nicolò Longobardo, then responsible for the Jesuit residence in Nanjing. It is likely that João da Rocha obtained the image collection through Longobardo and subsequently reworked and engraved illustrations based

Seven extant copies of the *Song nianzhu guicheng* are currently known, deriving from two different sets of wood-blocks. Their locations have been systematically identified by Qu Yi, and further discussed in subsequent studies, including Fu Ji's survey. See Yi Qu, "Song nianzhu guicheng (Die Anweisung zur Rezitation des Rosenkranzes)" *Monumenta Serica* 60 (2012), 206-207; and Ji Fu, *Précher, réciter et illustrer le Rosaire en Chine au XVIIe siècle : Étude du Song nianzhu guicheng* (Master's thesis, École du Louvre, 2016), 13. These copies are preserved in the Vatican Library (Borgia Cinese 336,5), the Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu in Rome (Jap. Sin. I, 43b), the Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma (Fondo Gesuitico 72.B.298), the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 7382 and Chinois 6861), the Austrian National Library (Sin. 1607), and the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles (Research Library 1374-445). The version consulted in this study is the copy held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Chinois 7382).

<sup>2</sup> The authorship of the *Song nianzhu guicheng* remains a subject of scholarly debate. The majority view attributes it to João da Rocha, as presented in Nicolas Standaert, *Methodology in View of Contact Between Cultures: The China Case in the 17th Century* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002), 812 and Albert Chan, *Chinese Books and Documents in the Jesuit Archives in Rome: A Descriptive Catalogue: Japanica-Sinica I-IV* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 71-72. In contrast, the minority view attributing the work to Gaspar Ferreira is found in Xiliang Wang, "Wan Ming Shou Bu Tianzhujiào Banhua Song Nian Zhu Guicheng Kao" [A Study of the First Catholic Woodblock Print Song Nian Zhu Guicheng in the Late Ming Dynasty], *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, 48/7 (2021), 93-108.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* is an illustrated Gospel book devised by the Jesuit Jerónimo Nadal and first published in Antwerp in 1593; it was widely used as a visual aid for meditation and catechesis in the Jesuit tradition.

on it for inclusion in *Song nianzhu guicheng*<sup>4</sup>. As a result, this book became the earliest late-Ming work to present the lives of Mary and Jesus in a systematic manner through a relatively large set of images. However, it should be noted that the structure and theological logic of the *Song nianzhu guicheng* were not entirely organized around the life of Jesus. Instead, the book is an illustrated version of the Rosary. As a vital component of Catholic spiritual tradition, the prayer structure of the Rosary was largely established by the fifteenth century, comprising fifteen Marian Mysteries (*Mysteria Sacratissima*), divided into three sets of five. The first set, the *Joyful Mysteries (Gaudiosa Mysteria)*, focuses on the birth and childhood of Jesus; the second set, the *Sorrowful Mysteries (Dolorosa Mysteria)*, recounts the Passion of Jesus; and the third set, the *Glorious Mysteries (Gloriosa Mysteria)*, centers on the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, as well as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.<sup>5</sup> This structure forms the fundamental framework for the textual and visual organization of the *Song nianzhu guicheng*.

Current scholarship has produced substantial research on Jesuit publishing and the dissemination of images in China during the late Ming and early Qing. Regarding the introduction of Western visual resources, Paul Pelliot examined how European paintings and prints were brought into China around 1600 through Jesuit missionaries—especially Matteo Ricci—and analyzed their impact on Chinese art and culture.<sup>6</sup> Yuan Xiao-jun surveyed missionary publishing and translation activities in the Ming, highlighting their interaction with woodblock printing;<sup>7</sup> Qi Baicheng and other scholars explored how Western visual imagery, in the context of the "transmission of Western learning to the East," influenced traditional Chinese woodblock art.<sup>8</sup> With respect to *Song nianzhu guicheng*, Rui Oliveira Lopes has investigated this book as a case study in the visual adaptation of Christian art, situating it within the particular visual experiences of Chinese audiences and the missionary challenges.<sup>9</sup> Wang Xintong and Wang Xiliang have analyzed its localization respectively from the perspectives

<sup>4</sup> Matteo Ricci, *Lettere (1580-1609)*, ed. Francesco D'Arelli under the direction of Piero Corradini, preface by Filippo Mignini, essay by S. Bozzola (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Beibei Zhang, *Mingqìng Yesuhuí Shèngmùxiāng yānjiú* [A Study of Jesuit Images of the Virgin Mary during the Ming and Qing Dynasties] (PhD diss., Shanghai Normal University, 2016), 65-67.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Pelliot, "La peinture et la gravure européennes en Chine au temps de Mathieu Ricci," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd series, 20/1 (1921), 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> Xiaojun Yuan, "Mingchao laihua Chuanjiaoshi fanyi yu chuban huodong tanjiu" [A Study on the Translation and Publishing Activities of Missionaries in the Ming Dynasty], *Journal of Social Science of Harbin Normal University*, 5 (2014), 167-169.

<sup>8</sup> Baicheng Qi & Qun Zhang, "Xi Hua Dong Jian: Dui Ming-Qing Mubanhua de Yingxiang" ["The Spread of Western Painting: Its Impact on Ming-Qing Woodblock Prints"], *Zhongguo Zongjiao*, 1 (2022), 86-87.

<sup>9</sup> Rui Oliveira Lopes, "Jesuit Visual Culture and the *Song nianzhu guicheng*: The Annunciation as a Spiritual Meditation on the Redemptive Incarnation of Christ," *Art in Translation*, 12/1 (2020), 82-113.

of pictorial style and religious devotion.<sup>10</sup> Zhang Beibei has conducted a detailed textual study of the relationship between its content and imagery,<sup>11</sup> while Dong Lihui examined the publisher João da Rocha, the publishing site of Nanjing, and the broader missionary context, stressing how these factors directly shaped strategies of adaptation and publication, particularly Rocha's adjustments in response to the difficulties of evangelization.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, interdisciplinary approaches have introduced new theological and intellectual frameworks for interpreting such images. José María Salvador-González's studies on the symbolic significance of the "Hortus Conclusus" and the metaphor of the Virgin as "Domus Sapientiae" (House of Wisdom) provide an essential perspective for image analysis in this paper.<sup>13</sup> Paola Demattè's research on the Jesuits' appropriation and grafting of Confucian thought in their Chinese mission further illuminates the cultural background underpinning their visual strategies.<sup>14</sup>

However, current research still exhibits two main shortcomings: first, a lack of detailed case studies on the most significantly altered scenes in Marian imagery; second, an absence of cross-cultural interpretations that examine the relationship between Marian theology and the Chinese cultural value system. Therefore, this paper will employ an interdisciplinary approach integrating iconographic analysis, visual culture studies, and cross-cultural comparison, supplemented by semiotics, the theory of mediality, and image translation theory, to construct an analytical framework for cross-cultural image studies. The aim is to move beyond a superficial description of the localization of images, and, through comparison with the original *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* and late-Ming Chinese indigenous prints, to reveal the theological motives, medial mechanisms, and cultural strategies

<sup>10</sup> Xiliang Wang, "Wan Ming shou bu Tianzhujiabanhua Song nianzhu guicheng Kao," [A Study of the First Catholic Wood-block Print Song Nian Zhu Guicheng in the Late Ming Dynasty], *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, 48/7 (2021), 93-108; Xintong Wang, "Shengxiang jiema: Wan Ming Song nianzhu guicheng chatu de Bentuhua zhuanyi" [Decoding Sacred Images: The Localized Translation of Illustrations in the Late Ming Song nianzhu guicheng], *Religious Studies*, 4 (2024), 170-179.

<sup>11</sup> Beibei Zhang, *Mingqing Yesuhui Shengmuxiang yanjiu* [A Study of Jesuit Images of the Virgin Mary during the Ming and Qing Dynasties] (PhD diss., Shanghai Normal University, 2016), 65-76.

<sup>12</sup> Lihui Dong, *Xiyang tuxiang de zhongshi zhuanyi: 16, 17 shiji Zhongguo Jidujiao tuxiang yanjiu* [Chinese Translation of Western Images: A Study of Chinese Christian Visual Culture in the 16th and 17th Centuries] (Xinbei: Huamulan Press, 2018), 134-150.

<sup>13</sup> José María Salvador-González, "Hortus Conclusus: A Mariological Symbol in Some Quattrocento Annunciations, According to Church Fathers and Medieval Theologians," *Religions*, 15/2 (2024), 1-17. doi:10.3390/rel15020143; José María Salvador-González, "The House/Palace in Annunciations of the 15th Century. An Iconographic Interpretation in the Light of the Latin Patristics and Theological Tradition," *Eikón Imago*, 10 (2021), 391-406. doi:10.5209/eiko.74161.

<sup>14</sup> Paola Demattè, "Christ and Confucius: Accommodating Christian and Chinese Beliefs," in *China on Paper: European and Chinese Works from the Late Sixteenth and Early Nineteenth Century*, ed. Paola Demattè and Marcia Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 36-55.

underpinning the visual translation of images in the *Song nianzhu guicheng*. The study will focus on analyzing the adaptive transformation of Western images within the medium of Chinese wood-block prints and elucidate how the Jesuits utilized Chinese cultural vocabulary (such as the concepts of chaste space and feminine virtues) to reinforce their theological message, thereby achieving a profound visual mediation. Furthermore, based on the analysis of this book, this paper will identify and clarify the nature of collaboration between Jesuit missionaries, Chinese literati, and local artisans.

## 2. An Inductive Comparison: Visual Localization in the *Song nianzhu guicheng*

First, in terms of overall layout, the *Song nianzhu guicheng* differs from its prototype, the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, which employed a "text above, image below" format. Instead, it adopts an "image on the right, text on the left" structure: the reader first encounters the illustration on the right-hand side and then turns to the text on the left to understand the subject and content of the image. The textual portion usually consists of a title, the recitation instructions of the *Rosary*, a "dedication" (献) and "prayers" (祈). This arrangement better accords with the traditional reading habits of Chinese readers, revealing the initial adaptation undertaken in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* during its cross-cultural transmission.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in the handling of the images themselves, most illustrations in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* retain the compositional framework and narrative setting of the prototype, preserving the biblical storylines and visual logic. However, the work does not simply transplant the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* mechanically. Instead, it carries out multiple layers of selection and transformation: not only simplifying narrative content, but also adjusting visual techniques and incorporating Chinese elements. The following three aspects of analysis will examine these paths of adaptation in detail.

### 2.1. From Complexity to Simplicity: Reduction and Focus in the Adaptation of Original Images

In the process of adapting the original *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, the *Song nianzhu guicheng* adopted a strategy of simplification in its visual presentation: the depiction of the main figures was further emphasized, while the background and secondary characters were significantly simplified or omitted. In terms of narrative logic, the focus was placed on the pivotal moments and symbolism of the mysteries, streamlining the complex narrative context and minor details present in the original work.

<sup>15</sup> Yi Qu, "Shiying yu Jianchi: You Song Nian Zhu Guicheng Zhong de Jianzhuwu Jiexi 17 Shiji Yesuhui Chuanjiao Celüe" [Adaptation and Persistence: Analyzing 17th-Century Jesuit Missionary Strategies Through the Architecture in Song Nian Zhu Guicheng], *History of Art and Design*, 10 (2015), 85-87.

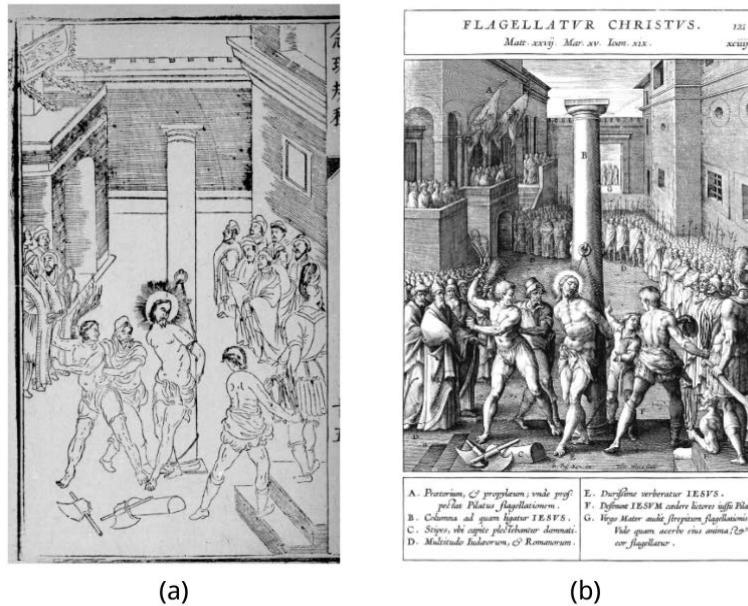


Fig. 1. *Flagellation of Christ*: A Comparison between Song nianzhu guicheng and Evangelicae Historiae Imagines.  
 (a) Version from Song nianzhu guicheng<sup>16</sup>, p. 40. Image source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.  
 (b) Version from Evangelicae Historiae Imagines<sup>17</sup>, p. 130. Image source: public-domain reproduction.

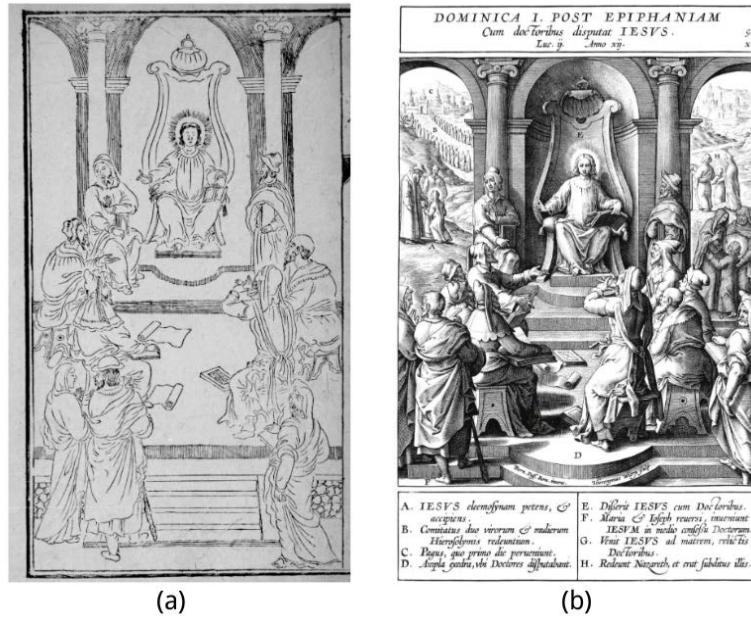


Fig. 2. *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple*: A Comparison between Song nianzhu guicheng and Evangelicae Historiae Imagines. (a) Version from Song nianzhu guicheng, p. 32.  
 (b) Version from Evangelicae Historiae Imagines, p. 18.

For example, the *Flagellation of Christ* (Fig.1) in the original *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* features a highly intricate composition, with a background filled with architectural elements and secondary figures, creating a multi-layered visual narrative. However, in the process of adaptation, Chinese printmakers omitted these details, removing scenes such as Pilatus observing the flagellation (panel A), the sorrowful

Virgin Mary (panel G), and some of the onlookers. This shift concentrated attention on the main figures, enhancing the visual focus of the image. Another example is the event of the *Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* (Fig.2). The original version depicts the pilgrimage group returning from Jerusalem (panels B and C) → Jesus remaining in the Temple and debating with the scribes (panels A, D, and E) → His

<sup>16</sup> João da Rocha, *Song nianzhu guicheng* (1619; repr., Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Manuscrits, Chinois 7382).

<sup>17</sup> Jerónimo Nadal, *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* (1593; <https://archive.org/details/EvangelicaeHistoriaeImagines/page/n5/mode/2up>).

parents finding Him and eventually returning home together (panels F, G, and H), forming a complete narrative structure of “departure–remaining–return”. In the *Song nianzhu guicheng*, only the scene of Jesus in the Temple debating with the scribes (panels D and E) is retained, while all other parts are omitted. These modifications are not isolated instances but rather represent a prevalent and distinctive characteristic in the visual treatment throughout the *Song nianzhu guicheng*. After eliminating redundant scenes, Chinese artisans frequently employed extensive “blank space” (留白) as a replacement. Gianni Criveller argues that this use of blank space serves not only to direct viewers’ attention toward the central figures and themes but also embodies the divine nature of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

This paper contends that the phenomenon of visual reduction arose from multiple factors. Firstly, from a structural perspective, the *Song nianzhu guicheng* adheres to the spiritual methods and theological tradition of the *Rosary*. The *Rosary* itself consists of prayers linked by beads, accompanied by meditation on fragments of the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary; hence, the completeness of Jesus’ deeds and a coherent diachronic narrative were not its primary focus. Secondly, constrained by the physical properties of printing blocks made from pear or jujube wood, Chinese woodcut prints were unable to replicate the intricate, multi-layered depth characteristic of Western copperplate engravings. Faithfully reproducing the original compositions would have resulted in overcrowded and chaotic scenes, necessitating structural simplification by the artisans. Furthermore, Ming-dynasty prints were often profoundly influenced by literati painting, an aesthetic that did not pursue the detailed depiction or multi-layered narratives found in Western art. Instead, meaning was conveyed through centralized composition and symbolic use of blank space.<sup>19</sup> This artistic convention led Chinese artisans to retain core figures while eliminating redundant scenes during the process of visual translation, thereby maintaining visual clarity and thematic emphasis. Finally, it is certain that these modifications were subject to the review and approval of the commissioning and supervising party—the Jesuits.

## 2.2. Visual Adaptation: Changes in Perspective, Technique, and Mode of Representation

Shaped by the technical traditions of local artisans, their visual habits, and the material characteristics of woodblock printing, the illustrations in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* diverge significantly in style, technique, and visual presentation from their Western copperplate prototype, the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, instead displaying the hallmarks of Chinese traditional woodblock prints. This process of “visual adaptation” is most evident in two aspects: the

transformation of perspectival conventions and the thorough localization of pictorial language.

First, in the construction of space, the two works employ fundamentally different perspectival systems. The original commonly adopts linear perspective, based on scientific calculation, to create illusionistic scenes with a unified vanishing point and a strong sense of spatial depth. By contrast, the Chinese artisans naturally employed indigenous methods of scattered perspective and parallel (axonometric) projection. This deeply ingrained visual tradition meant that, when translating Western prints, artisans—who may not have fully grasped the principles of focal perspective—produced certain unintended distortions.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in the illustration *Christ is Crowned with Thorns* (Fig.3), the composition presents multiple viewpoints and centers, constructing spatial depth through parallel lines while weakening recession into depth, ultimately resulting in a largely two-dimensional effect. Similarly, in the *Flagellation of Christ* (Fig.1), this cultural difference is clearly revealed: although the artisan attempted to imitate Western architectural forms, insufficient understanding of focal perspective led to the transformation of the radiating perspectival lines of the original into parallel decorative strokes, thereby depriving the architecture of the visual logic of diminution with distance.

Secondly, in terms of pictorial language, the Western conception of “form through volume” gives way to an Eastern aesthetics of “form through line.” The illustrations in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* completely abandon the Western copperplate technique of simulating light and volume through dense hatching and cross-hatching, and instead rely primarily on fluid, varied contour lines and brief textural strokes (cunfa 繪法) to construct figures—emphasizing outline rather than mass. This linear mode of depiction (baimiao, 白描 “plain drawing in line”) runs throughout nearly all the illustrations, and in the rendering of landscapes in particular it continues the long-standing traditions of Chinese woodblock illustration from the Ming period. Scholars generally agree that the series of prints is closely aligned with the late-Ming Hui-style (徽派)<sup>21</sup>, suggesting the possible involvement of Huizhou artisans.<sup>22</sup> Clear evidence can be found in the sixth illustration, *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane* (Fig.4-a), and the tenth, *The Crucifixion* (Fig.4-c): the treatment of rocks and

<sup>20</sup> Xintong Wang, “Shengxiang jiema: Wan Ming *Song nianzhu guicheng* chatu de Bentuhua zhuanyi” [Decoding Sacred Images: The Localized Translation of Illustrations in the Late Ming *Song nianzhu guicheng*], 172.

<sup>21</sup> Hui-style woodblock printing originated in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) and reached its peak in the Huizhou region by the mid-Ming period (ca. 1500-1550). Its visual formation relied primarily on the *baimiao* technique, while its woodblock illustrations absorbed and transformed the theories, techniques, and modes of expression of Chinese literati painting.

<sup>22</sup> Xiaoye Mo, 17-18 *Shiji Chuanjiaoshi yu Xihua Dongjian* [Missionaries and the Spread of Western Art in the 17th and 18th Centuries] (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2002), 112. Xiliang Wang, “Wan Ming Shou Bu Tianzhuiao Banhua *Song Nian Zhu Guicheng Kao*” [A Study of the First Catholic Woodblock Print *Song Nian Zhu Guicheng* in the Late Ming Dynasty], *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, 48/7 (2021), 100.

<sup>18</sup> Gianni Criveller, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China: The Jesuits’ Presentation of Christ from Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni* (Chengdu: Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 1997), 248-294.

<sup>19</sup> Michela Bussotti, “The Gushi huapu, a Ming Dynasty Wood-Block Printing Masterpiece in the Naples National Library,” *Ming Qing Yanjiu*, 4/1 (1995), 11-44.

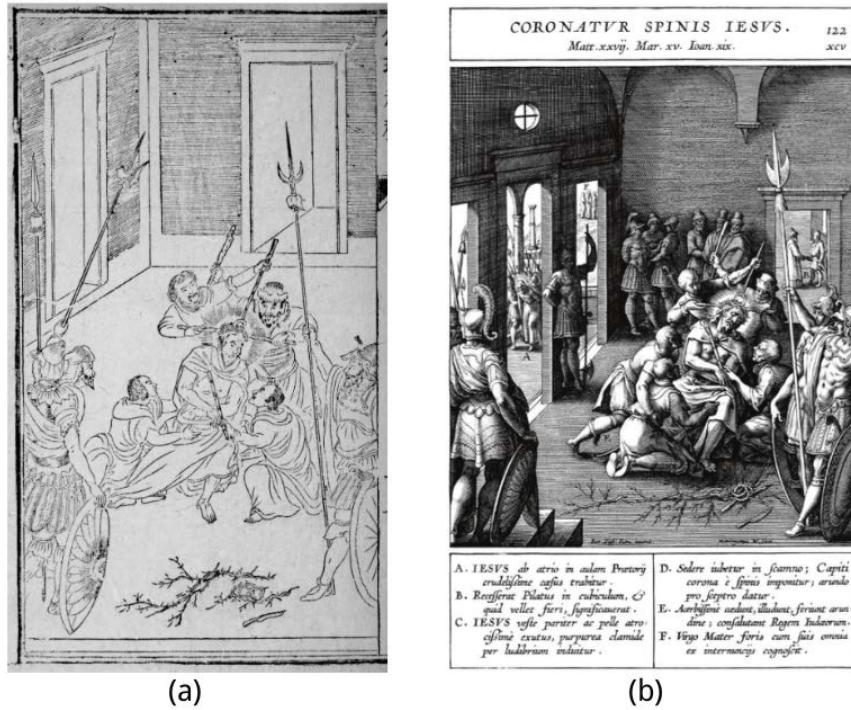


Fig. 3. *Christ is Crowned with Thorns: A Comparison between Song nianzhu guicheng and Evangelicae Historiae Imagines.* (a) Version from *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 44.  
 (b) Version from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 132.

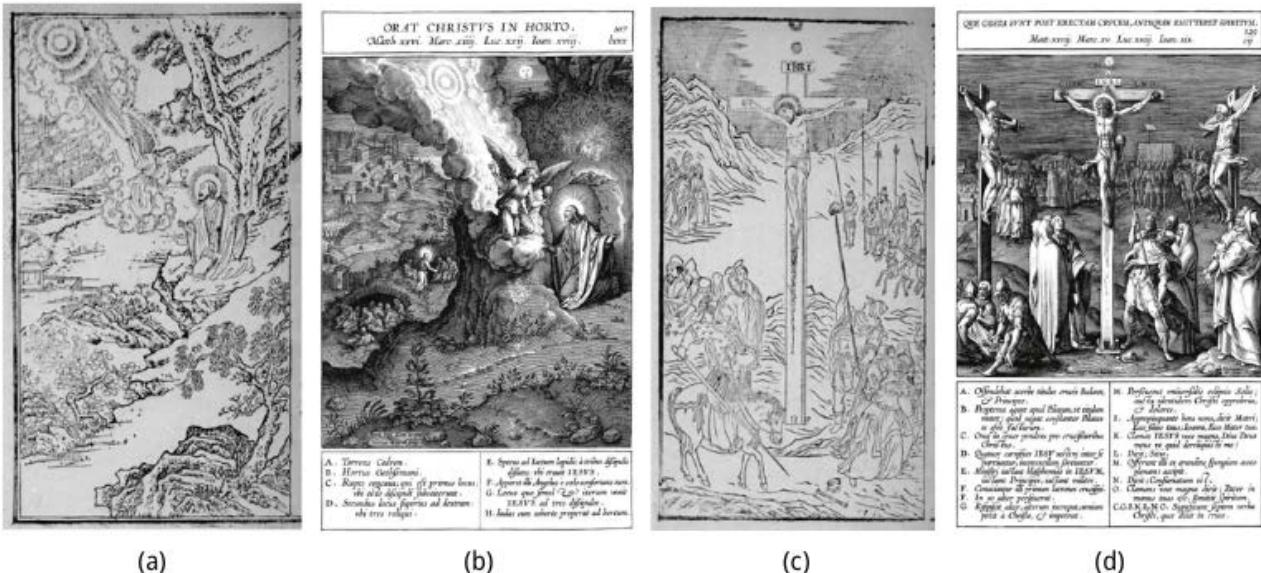


Fig. 4. A Comparison between *Song nianzhu guicheng* and *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*.  
 (a) *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane* in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 38. (b) *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane* in *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 116. (c) *Crucifixion* in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 46. (d) *Crucifixion* in *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 138.

mountains frequently employs finely incised strokes that mimic the cunfa of traditional Chinese landscape painting (such as the fupi cun, 斧劈皴 “axe-cut texture stroke” or pima cun, 披麻皴 “hemp-fiber stroke”), while the rendering of foliage is entirely consistent with Huizhou woodblock techniques. It is precisely this fundamental technical divergence that results in a strikingly different treatment of light and shade: the illustrations as a whole lack shadows modeled according to the logic of a fixed light source, and

instead tend toward a flatter and more decorative effect. In visual terms, this marks the transformation of the work from a Western narrative print tradition into an Eastern tradition of didactic illustration.

### 2.3. Symbolic Substitution: The Incorporation and Transformation of Chinese Elements

In the *Song nianzhu guicheng*, one finds numerous elements rendered in a distinctly Chinese style. On the

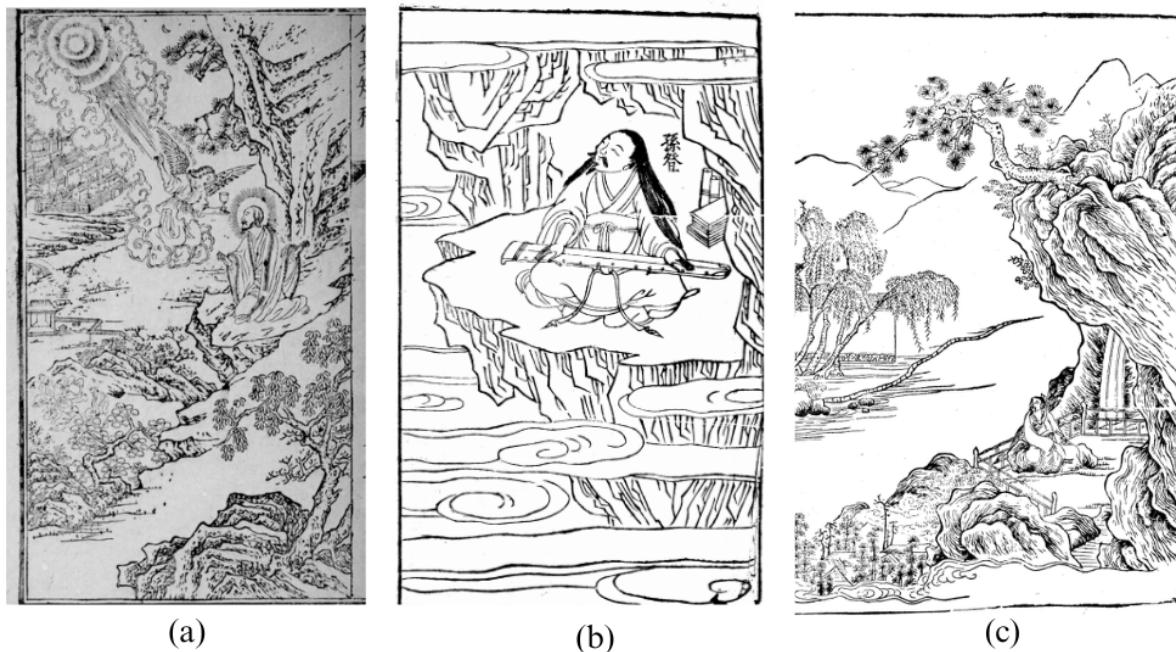


Fig. 5. Comparison of Prints in *Song nianzhu guicheng* with Other Ming Dynasty Prints. (a) *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane* in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 38. (b) *Sun Deng Zhuan*<sup>23</sup> in *Youxiang liexian quanzhuan*<sup>24</sup>, p. 295. Image source: National Archives of Japan. (c) *You Ju*<sup>25</sup> in *Tangshi huapu*<sup>26</sup>, p. 143. Image source: National Archives of Japan.

decorative level, for instance, the small trees flanking the scene of The *Nativity*, the faint mountain ranges in the background of The *Crucifixion*, or the branches extending into the composition from the right in The *Ascension*—all of these details clearly derive from the hand and aesthetic sensibility of local Chinese artisans. As ornamental devices, they were not only easy for the craftsmen to execute and useful in filling compositional voids, but they also infused the works with a characteristically Chinese charm and sense of poetic atmosphere.<sup>23242526</sup>

Yet some modifications extend beyond mere ornamentation, involving deeper reconstructions of pictorial mood and architectural space, thereby revealing striking differences between Chinese and Western modes of thought. For example, in *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane* (Fig.5), the *Song nianzhu guicheng* adds several archetypal features of Chinese landscape imagery: Christ is depicted standing upon a prominent rocky terrace (in place of the cave in the original composition), surrounded by jagged and grotesque rocks, while a solitary tree grows out of a crevice in the lower right corner. Such motifs were commonplace in Ming-dynasty woodblock prints and

literati painting.<sup>27</sup> Within the Chinese cultural lexicon, the elevated terrace or cliff often symbolizes the lofty ground of the recluse, set apart from the mundane world and embodying a state of transcendent purity; the surrounding jagged rocks suggest a perilous environment and worldly adversity; and the solitary tree sprouting from a rocky fissure functions as a concrete emblem of the hermit's character, symbolizing resilience and steadfastness in the face of hardship.<sup>28</sup> This visual vocabulary, closely aligned with the existential circumstances of sages in literati painting, resonates profoundly with the solitude, inner struggle, and spiritual transcendence of *Christ at Gethsemane*. In this sense, the image constitutes a creative recontextualization of a biblical scene within the symbolic landscape of Chinese culture.

In the depiction of *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Fig.6), the Gospel of Matthew records that Jesus' tomb was hewn out of rock and sealed with a large stone. The *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* strictly adheres to this description, portraying an angel moving the large stone away and placing it to the side of the tomb entrance. However, in the corresponding illustration of the *Song nianzhu guicheng*, the design of the tomb differs significantly from the Western version: the artist abandoned the Western-style rock-sealed tomb entrance and instead employed a traditional Chinese enclosed brick structure, replacing the

<sup>23</sup> Sun Deng (c. 220–280 CE) was a recluse during the Wei-Jin period who dwelled in seclusion at Sumen Mountain. His life and associations reflect the eremitic traditions of this era.

<sup>24</sup> Shizhen Wang (comp.), *Youxiang liexian quanzhuan* (Wanli period, 1573–1620; repr., Tokyo: National Archives of Japan, Neiku Cabinet, Call No. 311-0258).

<sup>25</sup> From the poem *Seven Poems on Idyllic Life*, No.5 by poet Wang Wei (699–761). Excerpt from the original text: “Below the mountain, a lone smoke plume, a distant village; At the sky’s edge, a solitary tree, the high plateau.” Original text: “山下孤煙遠村，天邊獨樹高原”.

<sup>26</sup> Fengchi Huang, *Tangshi huapu* (Wanli-Tianqi period, 1573–1627; repr., Tokyo: National Archives of Japan, Neiku Cabinet, Call No. 061-0007).

<sup>27</sup> Suliang Zeng, “Guji de Meigan: Tantao Zhongguo Wenren Shanshuihua Zhong de Guyin de Shenceng Yishi” [Lonesome Aesthetics—The Profound Consciousness of Solitude in Chinese Literati Landscape Painting], *Journal of Calligraphy and Painting Arts*, 7 (2019), 10–13.

<sup>28</sup> Qingzhen Li and Shi Tianrui, “Zhongguohua Yinshi xingxiang de shenmei xingtai” [The Aesthetic Form of the Hermit Image in Chinese Painting], *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute (Fine Arts & Design)*, 2 (2018), 141–145.

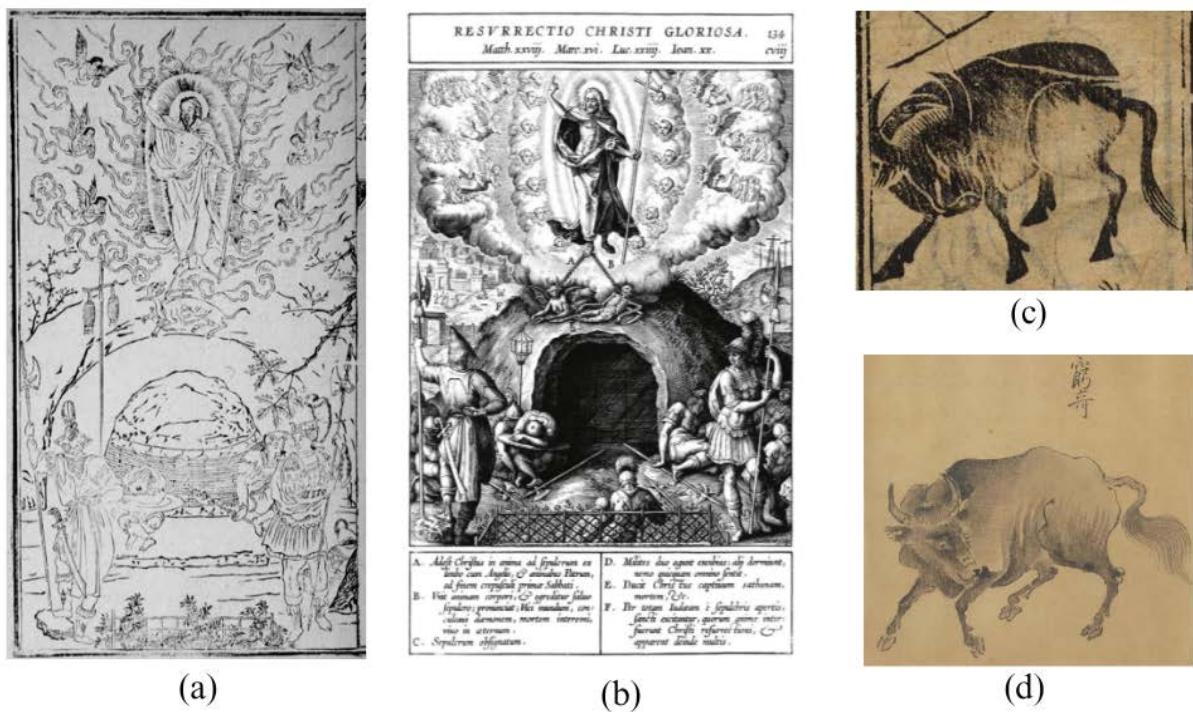


Fig. 6. The Resurrection of Christ: A Comparison between *Song nianzhu guicheng*, *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* and examples of Qiongqi in other works of the same period. (a) Version in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 48. (b) Version in *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 144. (c) Qiongqi in *Wenlin maojin wanbao quanshu*<sup>29</sup>, p. 114. Image source: General Library, The University of Tokyo. (d) Qiongqi in *Guaiqi Niaoshou Tujuan*<sup>30</sup>, ca. Edo period, Seijo University Library, Tokyo. Image source: Seijo University Library.

large stone with brick sealing. This modification was likely intended to prevent local viewers from misinterpreting the scene due to unfamiliarity with the tomb's appearance.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* version, the skull commonly depicted beneath Jesus' feet in Western images is omitted, while the horned creature originally symbolizing a demon is replaced by a monster rendered in a Chinese stylistic idiom. Some scholars have suggested that this figure should be understood as a "tomb-guarding beast"<sup>32</sup> or another type of tomb guardian<sup>33</sup>. However, the fu

nerary practice of placing such guardian figures in tombs had largely declined after the Five Dynasties period<sup>34</sup> (907-960), making it less likely that Ming-dynasty (1368-1644) printmakers would have readily recognized or consciously adopted this motif. Moreover, tomb-guarding beasts primarily functioned as protective figures intended to safeguard graves from disturbance; when placed in this context, such a role would conflict with the theological meaning of Christ's triumph over death and evil. Based on the visual features of the image and corroborated by textual sources, this study proposes that the creature may instead be related to Qiongqi (窮奇), a malevolent beast in ancient Chinese mythology characterized by a radically inverted moral logic—one that aids evildoers while harming the virtuous<sup>35</sup>. In this context, the creature functions effectively as a visual substitute for the Western demon or skull, translating the concept of evil into a form more readily intelligible to Chinese viewers.

<sup>29</sup> Ziming Liu. *Wenlin maojin wanbao quanshu* (1612; repr., Tokyo: General Library, The University of Tokyo, Call No. A00:6062).

<sup>30</sup> The *Guaiqi niaoshou tujuan* (怪奇鳥獸圖卷), by an unknown artist, presents seventy-six depictions of strange birds and mythical beasts, each provided with a caption and a short cursive inscription. The imagery largely derives from Chinese pictorial sources of the Ming and Qing periods and is executed in color. The scroll is generally dated to the Edo period in Japan.

<sup>31</sup> Yi Qu, "Shiying yu jianchi: You Song nianzhu guicheng zhong de jianzhuwu jieji 17 shiji Yesuhui chuanjiao celüe" [Adaptation and Persistence: Analyzing 17th-Century Jesuit Missionary Strategies Through the Architecture in Song Nian Zhu Guicheng], *History of Art and Design*, 10 (2015), 85-87.

<sup>32</sup> Tomb-guarding beast (鎮墓獸 *Zhenmushou*), are ancient Chinese burial objects. Often a combination of various animal features, they were placed in tomb chambers or passages to ward off evil and protect the deceased.

<sup>33</sup> Xintong Wang, "Shengxiang jiema: Wan Ming Song nianzhu guicheng chatu de Bentuhua zhuanyi" Decoding Sacred Images: The Localized Translation of Illustrations in the Late Ming *Song nianzhu guicheng*, *Religious Studies*, 4 (2024), 177; Lihui Dong, *Xiyang tuxiang de zhongshi zhuanyi: 16, 17 shiji Zhongguo Jidujiao tuxiang yanjiu* [Chinese Translation of Western Images: A Study of Chinese Christian Visual Culture in the 16th and 17th Centuries] (Xinbei: Huamulan Press, 2018), 150.

<sup>34</sup> Fu Yu, "Zhenmushou de lishi liubian" [The Historical Evolution of Tomb Guardian Beasts], *Wenshi Zazhi* (Journal of Historical and Literary Studies), no. 1 (1993), 28-30.

<sup>35</sup> According to the *Shenji jing* (神異經), Qiongqi resembles an ox but has the tail of a civet, long enough to trail along the ground; it possesses hooked claws and serrated teeth. When it encounters the loyal and trustworthy, it bites and devours them; when it encounters the treacherous and wicked, it captures beasts on their behalf and attends to their needs. Original text: "窮奇似牛而狸尾, 尾長曳地.....鉤爪鋸牙。逢忠信之人, 齒而食之; 逢姦邪則擒禽獸而伺之" Available online: <https://ctext.org/shenijjing/zhs> (accessed on 18 January 2026).

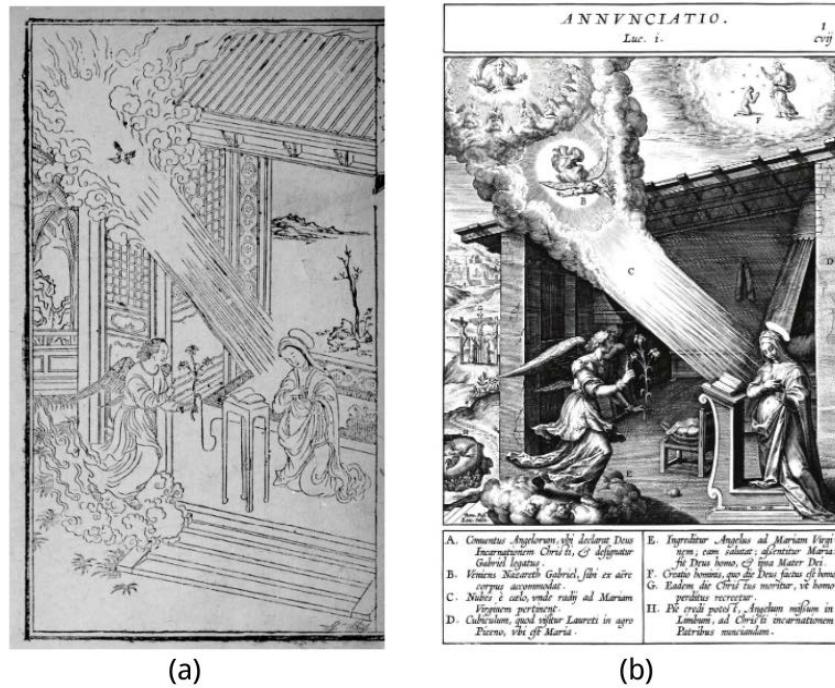


Fig. 7. *The Annunciation: A Comparison between Song nianzhu guicheng and Evangelicae Historiae Imagines.*  
(a) Version from *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 18. (b) Version from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 10.

### 3. In-Depth Analysis of Core Images: Marian Scenes as Sites of Localization and Theological Adaptation

As discussed in Chapter Two, the illustrations of *Song nianzhu guicheng* underwent multilayered changes in the process of visual and cultural adaptation, ranging from ornamental details to the restructuring of entire spatial settings. The most striking and strategically significant examples of this phenomenon are found in the scenes of the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation*. Wang Xiliang has observed that these scenes closely align with visual patterns previously employed in late-Ming fiction and drama illustrations, interpreting this as evidence of an increasing convergence in woodblock printmaking styles during the late Ming.<sup>36</sup> Wang Xintong, from the perspective of workshop practices, has argued that local artisans, in order to improve efficiency, frequently “pasted” or “recycled” pre-constructed motifs from other Ming woodblock prints to assemble complex scenes more quickly.<sup>37</sup>

This article, however, contends that such explanations are insufficient to fully account for the processes of visual adaptation evident in *Song nianzhu guicheng*. First, the most extensive adaptations occur not across the illustrations as a whole, but are concentrated specifically in the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation*, while other images tend to preserve the compositional framework of the original. This suggests that

localization here was not merely a byproduct of technical expediency or stylistic convergence, but rather a selective and purposeful strategy. Second, existing scholarship often overlooks the guiding role of the Jesuits in the publication process. As missionaries with rigorous theological training, the Jesuits could not have left the adaptation of these images entirely to chance. On the contrary, they were likely active promoters and supervisors of this cultural grafting, ensuring that localization served rather than undermined core doctrinal content. Thus, while the illustrations of *Song nianzhu guicheng* were executed by Chinese artisans, the formal principles and visual norms of Renaissance art, together with the theological requirements of Christian iconography, remained integral to the Jesuit program of evangelization.<sup>38</sup>

#### 3.1. Localization of Sacred Space: The Sinicized Reconstruction of the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation*

In the original *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, the *Annunciation* (Fig.7) depicts the Virgin Mary within a modest domestic interior, a treatment consistent with the traditional iconographic type of the “Madonna of humility.” By contrast, the same scene in *Song nianzhu guicheng* underwent a striking visual reconfiguration: the Virgin is placed within an ornate Chinese-style pavilion, surrounded by a landscaped garden, with a fenced enclosure on the left that creates an inward-facing and private space. This motif of the “enclosed garden” is absent from the original prototype but is accentuated in the Chinese version as a central visual focus. Such a transformation cannot be

<sup>36</sup> Xiliang Wang, “Wan Ming shou bu Tianzhujiu banhua Song nianzhu guicheng Kao” [A Study of the First Catholic Wood-block Print *Song nianzhu guicheng* in the Late Ming Dynasty], *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, 48/7 (2021), 100–101.

<sup>37</sup> Xintong Wang, “Shengxiang jiema: Wan Ming Song nianzhu guicheng chatu de Bentuhua zhuanyi” [Decoding Sacred Images: The Localized Translation of Illustrations in the Late Ming *Song nianzhu guicheng*], *Religious Studies*, 4 (2024), 174–175.

<sup>38</sup> Rui Oliveira Lopes, “Jesuit Visual Culture and the *Song nianzhu guicheng*: The *Annunciation* as a Spiritual Meditation on the Redemptive Incarnation of Christ,” *Art in Translation*, 12/1 (2020), 82–83. doi:10.1080/17561310.2020.1769905.

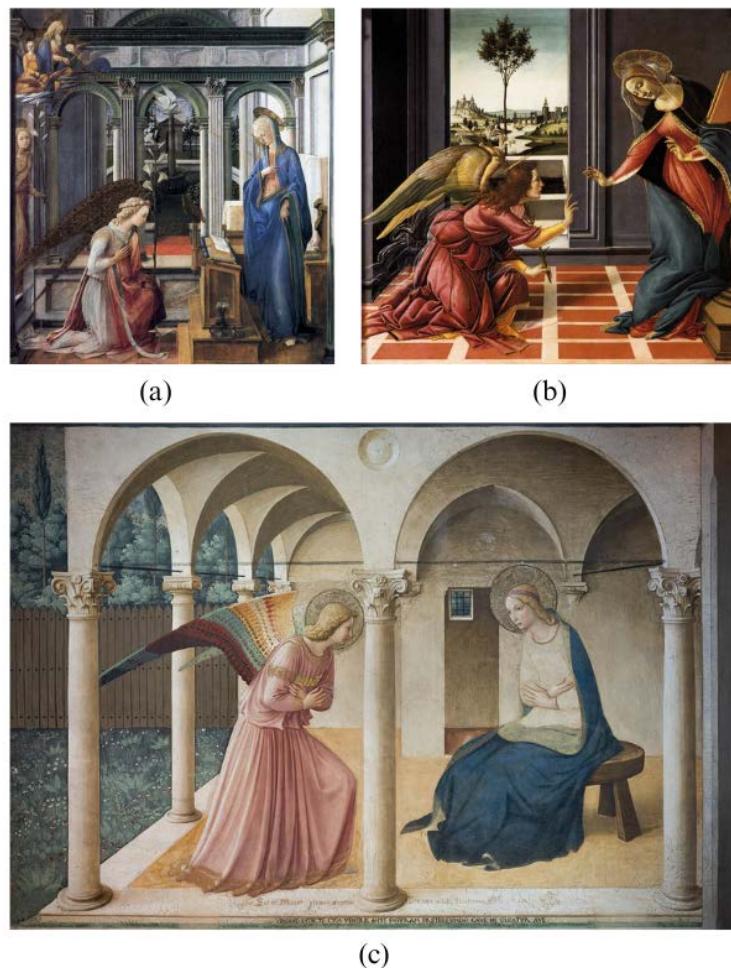


Fig. 8. Annunciation in Italian Renaissance Painting: (a) Filippo Lippi, *Murate Annunciation*, 1443, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. (b) Sandro Botticelli, *The Cestello Annunciation*, 1489-1490, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. (c) Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1440-1450, Convento di San Marco, Florence. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

reduced merely to differences in decorative style or artistic medium; rather, it represents a deliberate act of compositional reconstruction—one that relocates the Virgin from a humble hut to a dignified, secluded, and symbolically charged garden setting.

This enclosed garden corresponds to the theological concept of “Hortus Conclusus” in Western theology, where it serves as a symbol of the Virgin’s purity and divine election, deriving from *Song of Songs* 4:12: “An enclosed garden is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.”<sup>39</sup>

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the imagery of “Hortus Conclusus” appeared not only in theological writings but was also repeatedly invoked in responsories, hymns, and liturgical chants. Numerous Marian songs drawn from the *Song of Songs* explicitly referred to Mary as “hortus conclusus, fons signatus”, underscoring her dual privilege as both the Mother of God and the Ever-Virgin.<sup>40</sup> In the Renaissance, certain depictions of the

*Annunciation* (Fig.8) introduced gardens enclosed by fences or walls, visually embodying the two core tenets of Mariology: Mary’s virginal divine motherhood and her perpetual virginity. From an iconographic perspective, such treatments across different artists were not incidental; rather, they collectively resonated with the millennium-old Mariological tradition of interpreting the Virgin as the “Hortus Conclusus”.<sup>41</sup> This provides a theological basis for the modifications seen in *Song nianzhu guicheng*.

In addition, many medieval prayers and lyrical poems dedicated to the Virgin directly likened her to the Temple and its essential components, thereby deepening her identity as a sacred dwelling:

<sup>39</sup> “Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa; hortus conclusus, fons signatus.” *Song of Songs* 4:12. American Standard Version (ASV). Available online: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song+of+Songs+4%2C12&version=ASV> (accessed on 10 August 2025).

<sup>40</sup> José María Salvador-González, “*Hortus Conclusus—A Mariological Metaphor in Some Renaissance Paintings of the Annunciation in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns*” *Religions*, 14/1 (2023), 9-18. doi:10.3390/rel14010036; José María Salvador-González, “*Hortus Conclusus: A Mariological Symbol in Some Quattrocento Annunciations, According to Church Fathers and Medieval Theologians*” *Religions*, 15/2 (2024), 3-7. doi:10.3390/rel15020143.

<sup>41</sup> José María Salvador-González, “*Hortus Conclusus—A Mariological Metaphor in Some Renaissance Paintings of the Annunciation in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns*” *Religions*, 14/1 (2023), 9-18. doi:10.3390/rel14010036; José María Salvador-González, “*Hortus Conclusus: A Mariological Symbol in Some Quattrocento Annunciations, According to Church Fathers and Medieval Theologians*” *Religions*, 15/2 (2024), 7-13. doi:10.3390/rel15020143.

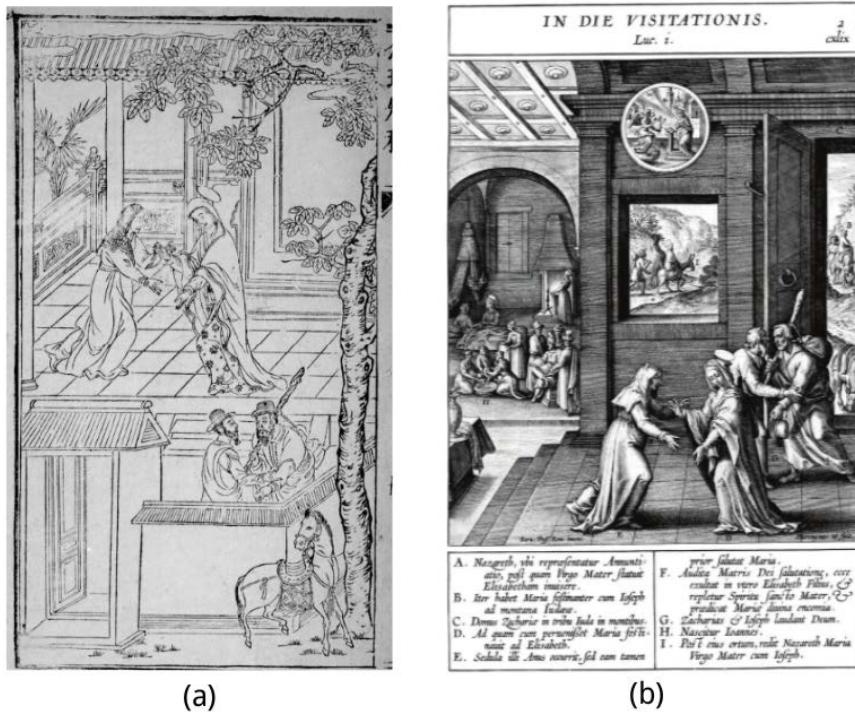


Fig. 9. The Visitation: A Comparison between *Song nianzhu guicheng* and *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*.  
 (a) Version from *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 20. (b) Version from *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, p. 12.

From your bridal room Royal Palace of Modesty, The Giant of two twin substances, [is conceived and born] to run the road quickly.<sup>42</sup>

Mary, splendid honor of humankind, Throne of the Eternal King House [built] by Wisdom.<sup>43</sup>

Titles such as “Royal Palace of Virginity” (Pudoris aula regia) and “House of Wisdom” (Domus a Sapientia) symbolize the Virgin Mary’s purity and nobility, akin to a sacred temple, making her the divine vessel bearing Christ.<sup>44</sup> This tradition of liturgical language provided the theological foundation for the visual translation of the Virgin’s dwelling space in the Manual of the Rosary, explaining why the imagery transitions from a humble interior to an ornate Chinese pavilion—a “temple-like” motif adapted to local culture yet grounded in the Western doctrine of the Virgin as the sacred dwelling of the Incarnate Word. In Renaissance Europe, depictions of the Annunciation often portrayed the Virgin’s residence as a palace or a noble mansion.<sup>45</sup> This portrayal was not meant to be realistic but carried profound theological symbolism. According to interpretations by Church Fathers and theologians, the palace

symbolized the Virgin Mary’s virginal womb, the sacred “Aula Regia” or “Domus a Sapientia” where the Son of God was incarnated.<sup>46</sup>

The Visitation (Fig.9) scene likewise reflects a strategic arrangement of symbolic space, and in *Song nianzhu guicheng* the modifications from the original are even more substantial. Once again, an enclosed courtyard or garden is introduced, here depicted as a microcosm in which the miraculous encounter takes place. It functions simultaneously as a space for meditation, a locus of sacred encounter, and the setting of Mary’s visit itself, thereby underscoring the Virgin’s chastity, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the divinity of Christ.<sup>47</sup> The positioning of the figures is also significantly altered: Mary and Elizabeth are placed beneath the eaves, evoking protection and blessing, while Joseph and Zechariah are set apart in the courtyard, with a clear spatial division between the two groups. This arrangement situates the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth within a domestic, feminized, and private sphere, allowing them to experience an atmosphere of naturalness and tranquility indoors. At the same time, the enclosed garden defined by walls carries symbolic connotations of civilization and order, standing in sharp contrast to the untamed and chaotic natural world beyond.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.2. Between the Sacred and the Secular: The Strategic Convergence of Local

<sup>42</sup> “Procedens de thalamo suo Pudoris aula regia, Geminae Gigas substantiae, Alacris ut currat viam.” (Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hymnus IV. PL 16, 1411*).

<sup>43</sup> “Maria, decus hominum, Regis aeterni solium, Septem columnis edita Domus a Sapientia.” (Petrus Damianus, *Carmina et Preces. LIII. Hymnus ad tertiam. PL 145, 936*)

<sup>44</sup> José María Salvador-González, “*Domus Sapientiae: A Mariological and Christological Metaphor According to the Patristic, Theological, and Liturgical Tradition*,” *Religions*, 16/3 (2025), 7-13. doi:10.3390/rel16030289.

<sup>45</sup> José María Salvador-González, “The House/Palace in Annunciations of the 15th Century. An Iconographic Interpretation in the Light of the Latin Patristics and Theological Tradition.” *Eikón Imago*, 10 (2021), 399–403. doi:10.5209/eiko.74161.

<sup>46</sup> José María Salvador-González, “*Domus Sapientiae: A Mariological and Christological Metaphor According to the Patristic, Theological, and Liturgical Tradition*”, *Religions*, 16/3 (2025), 30-31. doi:10.3390/rel16030289.

<sup>47</sup> Aida Ferri and Rubén Gregori, “The Illuminated Garden—The Visitation in the Book of Hours of Juana Enriquez,” *Religions*, 15/10 (2024), 13-14. doi:10.3390/rel15101238.

<sup>48</sup> Elena Martín Martínez de Simón, “El mundo vegetal en la Edad Media,” *Biblioteca: Estudio e Investigación*, 33 (2018), 49–54.

## Culture and Marian Narratives

Scholars have already observed that several illustrations in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* bear formal similarities to illustrations in late-Ming secular literature, particularly the *Annunciation* and the *Visitation*. Upon further analysis of the spatial reconstruction in these two images, this study finds that their spatial arrangements echo in striking ways the visual strategies employed in late-Ming secular illustrations.

Taking *Mudan ting*<sup>49</sup> (牡丹亭, The Peony Pavilion), Act Ten *Jingmeng*<sup>50</sup> (驚夢, A Surprising Dream) as an example (Fig.10), Du Liniang falls asleep in her secluded garden chamber. The scene employs eaves, fences, and trees to construct an enclosed and intimate space, highlighting her identity as a maiden “raised in the inner chambers, unacquainted with men”.<sup>51</sup> In late-Ming woodblock prints, such enclosed spaces centered on bedchambers or courtyards are extremely common, recurring widely in illustrations to vernacular narratives and theatrical works, including texts such as *Yuhe ji*<sup>52</sup> (玉合記, Jade Union Record), *Xingshi hengyan*<sup>53</sup> (醒世恆言, Stories to Awaken the World), and *Zichai ji*<sup>54</sup> (紫釵記, The Purple Hairpin) (Fig.11). This spatial arrangement reflects the normative expectation in traditional Chinese society that elite women should remain within the domestic interior.<sup>55</sup> The repeated depiction of enclosed space is often associated with the late-Ming cultural ideal of *zhenjie* (貞潔, chastity/virtue): it signifies both the social identity and moral character of young women of the inner quarters and, at a visual and conceptual level, forms a symbolic structure that can be placed in dialogue with the Christian theological notion of the Virgin’s perpetual virginity, a central Marian privilege. At the same time, it is worth noting that Du Liniang’s dream scene also forms a structural correspondence with the motif of the “Descent of the Holy Spirit” in the upper left of the

*Annunciation*. In both cases, an extraordinary element originating from “another realm” is positioned in the upper register of the image—the former being the symbolic scene that triggers the wondrous dream, and the latter the dove representing divine miracle. Although in *Jingmeng* this compositional device primarily functions as a boundary between dream and imagination, whereas in the *Annunciation* it serves to present the intervention of supernatural power into the real world, this shared structure—“a supernatural or non-real element above and figures within an interior or courtyard below”—likewise signals to the viewer that an extraordinary event is about to unfold, highlighting the common visual strategy employed in both images to construct scenes that transcend ordinary reality.

More broadly, the *Visitation* may be compared with an illustration from *Jingshi tongyan* (警世通言 Stories to Caution the World), the story *Suzhixian luoshan zaihe* (蘇知縣羅衫再合, The Reunion Through the Robe)<sup>56</sup> (Fig. 12-b). In both images, the encounter between figures is staged within a private and orderly courtyard setting, while visual cues such as an open doorway and the horse positioned beyond the courtyard wall serve to emphasize the motif of “visitation”. More significantly, the spatial treatment in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* aligns most closely with *Mudan ting*, Act Thirty *Huanrao*<sup>57</sup> (歡撓, Interrupting the Amour). Here, three distinct spatial layers are carefully demarcated: beneath the eaves, within the courtyard, and beyond the courtyard. The first layer—the outside world—represents the broader social and secular sphere; the second layer—the courtyard—serves as the space where men receive guests and conduct external affairs; and the third layer—beneath the eaves—constitutes the innermost, most private realm, functioning as an extension of the women’s boudoir. It should be emphasized that Ming-dynasty printmakers were by no means incapable of rendering interior scenes, as such compositions appear frequently in contemporaneous illustrated books and woodblock prints. The *Song nianzhu guicheng* thus modifies the original composition and spatial arrangement by relocating Joseph and Zechariah to the outdoor courtyard, a decision that may not have been accidental, but rather reflects a conscious spatial decision that conforms to the widely shared late-Ming cultural notion that “men manage external affairs; women manage internal affairs”<sup>58</sup> (男治外事, 女治內事) and symbolically embodies the relationship between private quarters and social order.

<sup>49</sup> *Mudan ting* (牡丹亭 The Peony Pavilion), fully titled *Mudan ting huanhunji* is a classic Kunqu opera masterpiece written by Ming dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) in 1598. It recounts the legendary love story between Du Liniang, the daughter of a prefect, and Liu Mengmei, a scholar—a romance that transcends life and death, blurring the boundaries between dreams and reality.

<sup>50</sup> *Jingmeng* (驚夢, The Interrupted Dream) is a pivotal scene in *Mudan ting*, narrating how Du Liniang encounters and falls in love with the scholar Liu Mengmei in a dream while in the rear garden of her family residence.

<sup>51</sup> Jingguang Liu, “Nǔxìng ziwo yishi de jiedu: Yi xiju Xixiang ji *Mudan ting* zhōng de nǔxìng xìngxiāng weili” [The Interpretation of Female Self-Consciousness: A Case Study of Female Images in The Romance of the Xixiang ji and *Mudan ting*], *Mingjia Mingzuo*, 11 (2025), 23.

<sup>52</sup> *Yuhe ji* (玉合記, Jade Union Record) is a Ming-dynasty chuanqi play by Mei Dingzuo (梅鼎祚, 1549-1612), generally dated to the late 16th century (Wanli era). It dramatizes the romance between Han Hong and Lady Liu of Zhangtai, unfolding through separation and reunion against a Tang-dynasty urban backdrop.

<sup>53</sup> *Xingshi hengyan* (醒世恆言, Stories to Awaken the World) is a late-Ming vernacular short-story collection compiled by Feng Menglong (馮夢龍, 1574-1646), first published in 1627. It contains 40 stories depicting love, morality, and social life in a style aimed at “awakening” readers through illustrative cases.

<sup>54</sup> *Zichai ji* (紫釵記, The Purple Hairpin) is a Ming-dynasty chuanqi play by Tang Xianzu, completed in 1587. It reworks the *Huo Xiaoyu* tale into a drama of love, separation, and eventual reunion, with the “purple hairpin” as the key token of recognition.

<sup>55</sup> Yuwei Sun. “Tang Xianzu *Mudan ting* de yuanlin kongjian yu yinyu shuxie” (Garden Space and Metaphorical Writing in Tang Xianzu’s *Mudan ting*). *Drama Home*, 33 (2024): 13-15.

<sup>56</sup> *Jingshi tongyan* (警世通言 Stories to Caution the World) is a late-Ming vernacular short-story collection compiled by Feng Menglong, first published in 1624. It contains 40 stories exploring human nature, ethics, and societal conflicts in a style designed to “caution” readers through profound moral narratives.

<sup>57</sup> *Suzhixian luoshan zaihe* (蘇知縣羅衫再合, The Reunion Through the Robe) is a story included in Feng Menglong’s late-Ming vernacular collection *Jingshi tongyan*. In this narrative, Magistrate Su escapes wrongful execution and, years later, achieves justice and reunites with his family through the crucial evidence of a blue robe.

<sup>58</sup> *Huanrao* (歡撓, Interrupting the Amour) is a pivotal scene in *Mudan ting*. It vividly depicts the moment when Liu Mengmei is secretly meeting with the spirit of Du Liniang. Suddenly, they are interrupted by Sister Stone, who knocks on the door outside. Liu Mengmei has no choice but to respond to her, while Du Liniang is forced to hide herself temporarily.

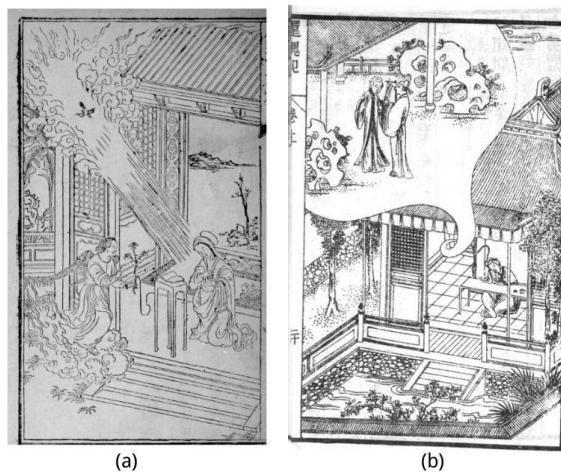


Fig. 10. Comparison of Prints in *Song nianzhu guicheng* with *Mudan ting*.  
(a) Annunciation in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 18. (b) Jingmeng in *Mudan ting*, p. 53.

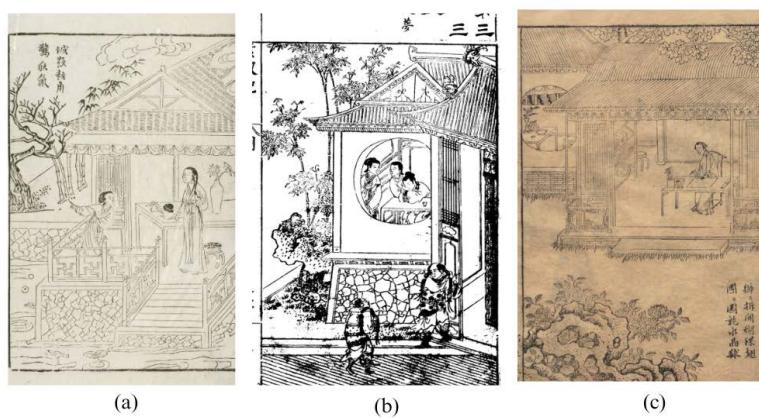


Fig. 11. Examples of enclosed spaces in Ming-dynasty illustrations. (a) *Zhufa* in *Yuhe ji*<sup>59</sup>, p. 29. (b) *Rumeng*<sup>60</sup> in *Zichai ji*<sup>61</sup>, p. 49. Image source: National Central Library. (c) *Su Xiaomei san nan xinlang*<sup>62</sup> in *Xingshi hengyan*<sup>63</sup>, p. 20. Image source: Library of Congress.

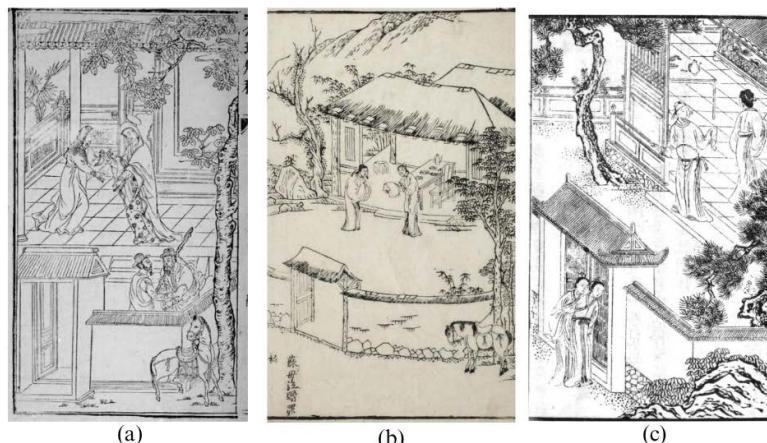


Fig. 12. Comparison of Prints in *Song nianzhu guicheng* with other Ming-dynasty illustrations.  
(a) Visitation in *Song nianzhu guicheng*, p. 20. (b) *Suzhixian luoshan zaihe* in *Jingshi tongyan*, p. 45. Image source: National Archives of Japan. (c) *Huan Rao* in *Mudan ting*, p. 183.

<sup>59</sup> “Men manage external affairs; women manage internal affairs. Without reason, men do not stay in their private rooms during the day, and women do not peek beyond the inner gate.” (*Zhu Xi, Jiali*). Original text: “男治外事，女治內事。男子晝無故不處私室，婦人無故不窺中門。”

<sup>60</sup> Tang Xianzu, *Mudan ting huanhun ji* (Wanli period, 1573–1620; repr., Nanjing: Nanjing Library, Call No. 119373).

<sup>61</sup> *Zhufa* (祝髮, Cutting the Hair) is Scene 23 of *Yuhe ji*. In this scene, Lady Liu of Zhangtai decides to cut her hair and disfigure herself to evade violence during the An Lushan Rebellion, seeking to preserve her life and chastity while hoping for a future reunion with her husband.

<sup>62</sup> Mei Dingzuo, *Yuhe ji* (1585; repr., Taipei: National Central Library, Call No. 407.221 15105).

<sup>63</sup> *Rumeng* (入夢, Entering the Dream) is Scene 33 of *Zichai ji*. It depicts Huo Xiaoyu, gravely ill from longing for Li Yi, receiving a shoe in a dream—interpreted as an auspicious sign foretelling their eventual reunion.

Behind this visual pattern lies the projection of Confucian cultural notions of female chastity and secluded domestic life. In late Ming society, the “*guifang*” (闺房, boudoir) and the private garden were not only the real settings of women’s daily lives, but also moralized spaces repeatedly invoked in literature and imagery—symbols of purity, order, and ritual propriety through their separation from the outside world.<sup>64</sup> By means of this “beneath the eaves, within the garden” visual convention, the work externalizes female inner virtue into a spatial image, allowing the viewer to perceive at a glance the values of chastity embodied therein. This process was not achieved through passive reception, but through substantial revisions to the original composition and scene arrangement. Within this cultural framework, the emphasis on courtyard settings in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* represents more than a superficial adaptation of visual elements; it functions as a cross-cultural strategy of symbolic grafting. In Western theology, the “*Hortus Conclusus*” was the classical emblem of the Virgin’s chastity, while in the Chinese context, the boudoir and private garden similarly carried moral connotations. By translating the Virgin’s theological attributes into spatial symbols familiar to Chinese viewers, Jesuit missionaries were able to embed doctrinal meanings seamlessly into China’s visual and intellectual framework, without the need to explicate abstruse theological terminology.

Based on the discussions in the preceding sections, we can broadly sketch the collaborative network reflected behind the *Song nianzhu guicheng*. José María Salvador-González has pointed out that, in Renaissance Italy, artists entrusted with major Christian commissions were often guided by clerics or scholars, who specified the figures, settings, gestures, garments, attributes, and symbols to be depicted in religious scenes.<sup>65</sup> If this was the case in Europe itself, then for local craftsmen in China—far removed from Catholic theological traditions—it would have been virtually impossible to grasp on their own the precise symbolic meanings of the “*Hortus Conclusus*” or the Marian sanctuary, let alone to consciously align them with Confucian thought. Consequently, the transformation evident in the overall composition and the emphasis on core themes in these images must necessarily have been the result of explicit direction and supervision by the Jesuits.

At the same time, the Jesuits themselves maintained close contact with late-Ming literati and possessed a certain understanding of Confucian culture, providing both the cognitive and cultural foundation for the adaptation of images. It can even be further speculated that the formation of this visual strategy may have involved interaction and collaboration with the Chinese literati. By the late Ming, collaboration between booksellers and literati had become a common practice in the publishing industry. Notably,

many prominent literati, including Ling Mengchu<sup>66</sup> (凌濛初) and Feng Menglong<sup>67</sup> (冯夢龍), even personally participated in printmaking projects.<sup>68</sup> Considering the striking similarities between these scenes and late-Ming literary illustrations, in terms of composition, narrative junctures, and even detail arrangement, we cannot rule out the presence of cultural intermediaries—literati familiar with Confucian ethical concepts and the vocabulary of popular imagery—who may have advised the Jesuits on which local cultural elements were most suitable for conveying Western theological themes. This kind of cross-cultural collaboration not only facilitated the localization of Marian imagery, but also reflects the Jesuits’ efforts to achieve a visual and intellectual consonance between Chinese and Western cultures.

### 3.3. The Triple Logic of Strategy: Spiritual Function, Cultural Adaptation, and Political Compromise

Through the preceding analysis of the localized transformation of Marian images in the *Song nianzhu guicheng*, we can clearly observe the deliberate grafting of visual elements and conceptual meanings. This cross-cultural process of symbolic translation was by no means accidental, but rather an intentional adaptive strategy adopted by the Jesuits within a specific historical context. More specifically, this pictorial strategy is manifested in three primary dimensions:

First, the Jesuits’ design of the images embodied a clearly defined spiritual function. The fundamental purpose of the *Song nianzhu guicheng* was not merely to provide visual narratives, but rather to serve the practice of spiritual contemplation. As an illustrated companion to the *Rosary*, its images functioned essentially as visual aids for meditative contemplation. As Rui Oliveira Lopes has pointed out, the Jesuits deliberately situated scenes such as the Annunciation within the courtyards and gardens of elite Chinese households, with the aim of enabling Chinese believers to more readily enter a state of prayer and contemplation.<sup>69</sup> This localized reconstruction of space was not a purely decorative adjustment, but

<sup>66</sup> Ling Mengchu (1580–1644) was a Ming-dynasty official, writer, and novelist. He authored novels, historical biographies, poetry, prose, and works of literary criticism, and oversaw the printing of a vast corpus of literary and theatrical texts.

<sup>67</sup> Feng Menglong (1574–1646) was a Ming-dynasty scholar-official, celebrated writer, playwright, folklorist, popular-literature author, and woodblock-print editor.

<sup>68</sup> Kazue Omino, “Myōmatsu Gōkei Ryōshi Kokatsukatsudō Kō: Ryō Mōsho to Shuppan” A Study of the Book Publishing Activities of the Ling Family in Wuxing during the Late Ming Dynasty: Ling Mengchu and Publishing], *Bulletin of Sinological Society of Japan*, 50 (1998), 169–170; Xianzhi Xu, “Mingmo tongsu xiaoshuo chuban bianji de tedian ji chuban guilü tantao” [Characteristics and Patterns of Publishing and Editing Popular Novels in the Late Ming Dynasty], *Times Education*, 12 (2006), 163.

<sup>69</sup> Rui Oliveira Lopes, “Jesuit Visual Culture and the *Song nianzhu guicheng*: The Annunciation as a Spiritual Meditation on the Redemptive Incarnation of Christ,” *Art in Translation*, 12/1 (2020), 100–101. doi: 10.1080/17561310.2020.1769905; Xiaoping Lin, “Seeing the Place: The Virgin Mary in a Chinese Lady’s Inner Chamber,” in *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O’Malley*, S.J., ed. John W. O’Malley, Hilmar M. Pabel, and Kathleen M. Comerford (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 194.

<sup>64</sup> Tang Xianzu, *Zichai ji* (1587; repr., Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Call No. 2012402421).

<sup>65</sup> *Su Xiaomei san nan xinlang* (蘇小妹三難新郎, Su Xiaomei Tests the Groom Three Times) is a short story in Volume 11 of *Xingshi hengyan*. It recounts how the talented woman Su Xiaomei tests her prospective husband three times through poetic wit and verbal challenges before marriage, emphasizing intellectual compatibility and literary skill.

a means of allowing viewers to experience theological mysteries more intensely within a familiar cultural environment.

Secondly, the Jesuits consistently adhered to the fundamental strategy of “Yifo Buru” (易佛補儒, adapting Buddhism to supplement Confucianism)—seeking to use Confucian ethics as an entry point for reconciling intellectual and cultural differences between China and the West.<sup>70</sup> They keenly recognized that, in comparison to Buddhism, Confucianism occupied a more firmly established position of orthodoxy within Chinese society. Thus, in order to gain acceptance on the intellectual and cultural level, it was essential to underscore the resonance between Christian doctrine and Confucian values. For instance, they translated works of mercy as Confucian “ren” (仁, benevolence), and emphasized in their writings the close semantic correspondence between the two.<sup>71</sup> Within this framework, the visualization of the concept of chastity became another ideal point of convergence—it could simultaneously echo the Confucian valorization of female virtue and convey the central theological significance of the Virgin as the ever-virgin. For the literati, such elements were not only intimately connected to the Confucian thought they were well acquainted with, but also evoked familiar narrative motifs in literature and art. Hence, this strategic process of visual grafting carried a clear evangelizing aim: to awaken cultural resonance among Chinese readers, thereby enabling them to more readily accept and more effectively comprehend Christian theological ideas.

Finally, the historical context in which the *Song nianzhu guicheng* was compiled should not be overlooked. The work was published around 1619, shortly after the conclusion of the Nanjing Incident.<sup>72</sup> According to Dong Lihui, the outbreak of the Nanjing Incident in 1616 stemmed from opposition to Catholicism by Daoist priests and certain officials, who accused the new faith of “misleading the people and disrupting governance” and submitted memorials to the imperial court on this basis. As a result, several missionaries were expelled or placed under house arrest, and missionary activities suffered a severe setback.<sup>73</sup> Within such a tense atmos-

sphere, Jesuits such as Nicolas Trigault and João da Rocha were compelled to exercise great caution in their visual strategies, so as to avoid provoking further hostility or misunderstanding. Their decisions were not purely artistic or theological in nature, but may also be understood as strategic compromises in the face of missionary adversity: while preserving the core of Christian doctrine, they sought, through visual adaptations attuned to the habits and sensibilities of Chinese readers, to secure a more stable space for the dissemination of Catholicism in China.

#### 4. Conclusion

The images in the *Song nianzhu guicheng* vividly exemplify the complex negotiation undertaken by Jesuits in late Ming China between theological principles and cultural adaptation in the process of cross-cultural transmission. As theological guides, the Jesuits not only ensured that the adaptation of images did not deviate from core doctrine, but also introduced purposeful modifications to the original *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* in light of their own theological understanding. Such revisions were informed not only by theological and spiritual considerations but also by a deliberate responsiveness to Chinese cultural contexts.

The realization of this adaptation was made possible by the unique collaborative network formed among Jesuits, Chinese literati, and artisans. The Jesuits, drawing on their theological expertise and knowledge of Chinese culture, played a leading role in guiding the adaptation of images; the literati, by contributing visual motifs aligned with the aesthetic sensibilities of the scholar-official class, built a bridge for Sino-Western cultural dialogue; and the artisans, through their mastery of woodblock printing techniques, translated theological concepts into a visual language intelligible to Chinese audiences. It is worth noting that this collaboration was not a matter of mere technical execution, but one grounded in the professional judgment and creative agency of all three parties within their respective domains. For instance, in the scene of the Annunciation, the Jesuits may have deliberately incorporated literati suggestions by combining the Western notion of the “Hortus Conclusus” with Chinese imagery of the “Yuanzhong Guige” (園中閨閣, boudoir in the garden), which was then rendered by artisans using Huizhou-style woodblock techniques. The result was a visual expression imbued with a profound depth of cross-cultural resonance.

This study argues that the adaptive strategies underlying the *Song nianzhu guicheng* can be traced to five interrelated dimensions. On the medial level, constrained by the technological conditions of early Catholic missions in China, the Jesuits had to rely on the woodblock skills of Chinese artisans, effecting a medium-based translation from copperplate engraving to Chinese-style woodblock printing. On the visual level, they deliberately employed indigenous symbols such as solitary trees and tomb guardians to enhance the immediacy and persuasiveness of pictorial narratives. On the spiritual level, the images

<sup>70</sup> Hao Fang, “Mingmo Qingchu Tianhuijiao bifu Rujia xueshuo zhi yanjiu” [A Study on the Catholic Adaptation of Confucian Tenets during the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties], *Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy at National Taiwan University*, 1962, 168; Jian Zhang, “Li Madou Tianzhu shiyi duiyu zongjiao Zhongguohua de qishi” [The Enlightenment of Matteo Ricci’s *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven on the Sinicization of Religion*], *The World Religious Cultures*, 1 (2021), 57-58.

<sup>71</sup> Xuliang Sun, “The Introducing, Adapting and Practicing of Catholic Notion of Works of Mercy in China in the Early 17th Century,” *Religions*, 16/2 (2025), 211, doi:10.3390/rel16020211.

<sup>72</sup> The “Nanjing Church Incident” 南京教案 refers to an event in the 44th year of the Wanli reign (1616) during the Ming Dynasty, when Shen Jin, the Vice Minister of Rites, reported three times that Catholic missionaries in China were allegedly colluding with the White Lotus Sect to plot against the government. Following these accusations, several foreign missionaries were arrested in Nanjing and Beijing and were subsequently escorted to Macau. This incident lasted for three years, severely diminishing the foothold that missionaries had in mainland China at the time.

<sup>73</sup> Lihui Dong, *Xiyang tuxiang de zhongshi zhuanyi: 16, 17 shiji Zhongguo Jidujiao tuxiang yanjiu* [Chinese Translation of Western Images: A Study of Chinese Christian Visual Cul-

ture in the 16th and 17th Centuries] (Xinbei: Huamulan Press, 2018), 135.

were designed to serve the localized needs of Rosary-based meditative practice, using familiar settings to assist Chinese believers in deepening their experience of faith. On the cultural-strategic level, the work sought to elicit the recognition of the literati and scholar-officials, striving for a symbolic convergence between Catholic doctrine and Confucian ethics in visual terms. On the political level, it directly responded to the missionary pressures following the Nanjing Incident, adopting visual compromises to avert conflict and to preserve a viable space for the endurance of Catholicism in China.

Through a case analysis of the *Song nianzhu guicheng*, this study reveals the frequently overlooked dimension of active agency in the processes of visual and cultural adaptation that resulted in the localization of Christian art in late Ming China. Future research may expand along three directions. First, a longitudinal comparison of Jesuit publications from different periods, including the *Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie*<sup>74</sup> (天主降生出像經解), could examine the diachronic evolution of visual strategies. Second, a cross-regional comparison with image adaptations in other contemporary missionary contexts would allow scholars to assess both the generality and specificity of Jesuit cultural adaptation strategies. Third, a more detailed investigation into the specific contributions of Chinese literati to image adaptation could provide a fuller understanding of the multifaceted mechanisms of Sino-Western cultural exchange in the late Ming. Such studies would further enhance our comprehension of the complexities of cultural translation inherent in the global circulation of early modern art.

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<sup>74</sup> *Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie* (天主降生出像經解, Illustrated history of the life of Christ) was published in 1637 by the Italian missionary Giulio Aleni. This woodblock print album is primarily adapted from Jerónimo Nadal's *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*. Aleni selected and reinterpreted approximately fifty illustrations from Nadal's work, systematically depicting key events from Jesus' birth to his resurrection.

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