

From the Altar to the Household. The Challenging Popularization of Christian Devotional Images, Objects, and Symbols in 16th and 17th Century China¹

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Abstract. After the expeditions of wealthy merchants and Franciscan missionaries during the 14th century, the Chinese empire under Ming rule did not engage profusely with the European world, and vice versa. This period of artistic and intellectual silence and detachment was broken in the late 16th century when the Jesuit missionaries reconnected two worlds –Europe and China– reactivating previous medieval commercial, artistic, and intellectual routes. Silk –the product *par excellence* commercialized along the routes connecting China and Europe– was then accompanied by other precious products, including Chinese ceramics reaching various European courts and European paintings that reached the Ming court in Beijing. This paper addresses the complex and challenging popularization of Roman Catholicism through objects and images during the early modern era. In particular, it focuses on the diffusion of devotional images and objects used by Roman Catholic missionaries and the religious practices related to them.

Keywords: Christianity in China; Devotional Images; Jesuit Missions; Matteo Ricci; Chinese Christianity.

[es] Del altar al hogar. La difícil popularización de las imágenes, los objetos y los símbolos devocionales cristianos en la China de los siglos XVI y XVII

Resumen. Después de los viajes de ricos mercaderes y misioneros franciscanos durante el siglo XIV, el imperio chino bajo el dominio Ming no se relacionó directamente con el mundo europeo, y viceversa. Este periodo artístico e intelectual de silencio y desapego se rompió a finales del siglo XVI, cuando los misioneros jesuitas volvieron a ligar dos mundos –Europa y China– que retomaron las anteriores rutas comerciales, artísticas e intelectuales medievales. La seda –el producto por excelencia que se comercializaba a lo largo de las rutas que conectaban China y Europa– se acompañó entonces de otros productos preciosos, como la cerámica china que llegó a varias cortes europeas. Mismamente, las pinturas europeas llegaron a la corte Ming de Pekín. Este artículo afronta la compleja y desafiante popularización del catolicismo romano durante la primera época moderna a través también de objetos e imágenes. En particular, se centra en la difusión de imágenes y objetos devocionales que utilizaron los misioneros católicos romanos y las prácticas religiosas relacionadas con ellos y con cristianos chinos también.

Palabras clave: Cristianismo en China; Imágenes devocionales; Misiones jesuitas; Matteo Ricci; Cristianismo chino.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The complex popularization of devotional images and Christian symbols from the late 16th century. 3. Using images to save the soul: the popularization of the cross and the use of apotropaic images. 4. Casting away demons: from the destruction of idols to exorcisms. 5. Conclusions: elusive Christian popular culture. 6. Written sources and bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

The enterprise of European Jesuit missionaries in China starting at the end of the 16th century appears, at first glance, to be embedded in the zeitgeist of the early modern world. The interconnected Mediterranean Sea, linking the court of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople, already known then as Istanbul, with the city of Venice, promoted exchanges between different cultures, religions, and ideas. Likewise, the outward projection of the region's hegemony, especially Spain and Portugal, promoted the establishment of stable trading routes between Europe and distant lands beyond the Mediterranean world, like Peru, India and, eventually, China.³ In this globalized world, goods from Rome, Lisbon and other European cities reached the American continent and East Asia, just as different goods were brought from distant lands back to Europe. Still, this 'new' world was still intertwined with previous European traditions, ideas and cults. The cult of the *Salus Populi Romani*, for example, became a crucial component of the Roman Catholic faith, especially during the Counterreformation⁴, and its original significance became a truly global phenomenon, spreading from Italy to China and India, and from Spain to Peru. Similarly, the Jesuit missionaries who established several colleges and institutions in Europe⁵ and beyond also based their educational system on ideas that were enrooted in the Scholastic school⁶ and in the Aristotelian tradition that thrived during the Middle Ages⁷. Similarly, the accounts of the travels of Marco Polo and Franciscan missionaries during the Middle Ages were an inspiring precedent for the missionaries who reached the Chinese empire.

This paper aims to illustrate the popularization of Roman Catholicism in China from the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 17th century⁸. During this period, devotional images coming from Europe and rel-

ics of saints, as well as blessed pieces of the Holy Cross, became crucial components of the mass transmission of faith. Mechanisms of transmitting faith already present in Mediterranean areas were also adopted in the new, non-European context. Despite the clear intention of several Jesuit missionaries to establish a cross-cultural dialogue with the Chinese literati and elite, the popularization of the Roman Catholic faith reached the lower classes as well⁹. Given the limited scope of this article, only select examples of the popularization of Christian artifacts and religious practices in the given period will be discussed. Specifically, images that would later only be available to a restricted number of elite individuals were first displayed in chapels and churches. These images, as a result, were directly owned by the elites but were also seen by members of the lower classes, who used alternative devotional objects. Moreover, other practices, such as casting away demons using relics, devotional images, crucifixes or other religious objects, were also part of the complex set of actions that contributed, directly or indirectly, to the popularization of Christianity within the Chinese empire.

2. The complex popularization of devotional images and Christian symbols from the late 16th century

When Fr. Matteo Ricci S.J. (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1552-1610) died on May 11, 1610, the choice of where to put his tomb became a crucial element to the legacy of Jesuit missionaries in China. Between the first of October and the tenth, the Jesuit missionaries visited various locations by invitation –including five different pagodas– in search of the most appropriate site for Ricci's burial place¹⁰. They identified the proper burial site to be the graveyard of Zhalan 柵欄 in Beijing (Fig. 1), where Ricci's tombstone is still preserved. Subsequently, previous idols were removed from one of the many halls of the Zhalan villa, and the hall was later named after the *Salus Populi Romani*, also known among the Jesuits as "Madonna di Santa Maria Maggiore"¹¹. This specific detail was the final result of a continuous popularization of the *Salus Populi Romani* in China by Jesuit missionaries who promoted its

Renaissance. Consequently, the 'little tradition' can be seen in the feasts and festivals and also in the combination of printed books and oral traditions. The criticism to this model Burke posed, however, is that this could be too narrow to define popular culture and it does not consider the participation of the elite in popular activities. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Ashgate, 1978), 23-29. This paper will consider the phenomenon of religious popular culture by looking at the overall perception of Christianity as a religious experience that was accessible, in different ways, to both elites and commoners.

⁹ A concrete example was given by Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, who directly mentioned the complexity of conversions to Christianity in the Shandong province in the given period. Refer to Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, "Christian Conversion in Late Ming China: Niccolò Longobardo and Shandong", *The Medieval History Journal* 12, no. 2 (2009): 275-301.

¹⁰ See *Fonti Ricciane. Documenti Originali Concernenti Matteo Ricci e la Storia delle Prime Relazioni tra l'Europa e la Cina (1579-1615)*, edited by Pasquale M. D'Elia (Rome: La libreria di Stato, 1942-1949), v. 2, Appendix II, 36. From now on, for sake of conciseness, the text will be referred to as *Fonti Ricciane*.

¹¹ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 1, 607 nn. 986-987.

³ Scholars like Ana Carolina Hosne analyzed these missions using a comprehensive gaze, especially in relation to missions to Peru and China that, despite evident differences, presented similar challenges and patterns. Refer to Ana Carolina Hosne, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570-1610 Expectations and Appraisals of Expansionism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁴ See Lucio Angelo Privitello, "The Ritual Around Replica: From Replicated Works of Art to Art as Replica (Part II)", *Objects Speciality Group Postprints* 7 (2000): 29-41; Pasquale M. d'Elia, "La prima diffusione nel mondo dell'immagine di Maria 'Salus Populi Romani'", *Fede e Arte* (1954): 301-311; Thomas Lucas, "Virtual Vessels, Mystical Signs: Contemplating Mary's Images in the Jesuit Tradition", *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 35 (2003): 1-48; Kirstin Noreen, "The Icon of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome: An Image and Its Afterlife", *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 660-672.

⁵ See Paul F. Grendler, *Jesuit Schools and Universities in Europe, 1548-1773* (Boston: Brill, 2018).

⁶ For late Scholasticism, see Daniel Schwartz, *The Political Morality of the Late Scholastics: Civic Life, War and Conscience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁷ See William A. Wallace, *Galileo, the Jesuits and the Medieval Aristotile* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ Peter Burke explained the complex phenomenon of popular culture in the early modern world. According to Burke, the model of two intertwined traditions, proposed by Robert Redfield, the 'little tradition' –that is, the one of the lower strata of society– and the 'great tradition' –that is, the one based on intellectual and elite movements– can be also applied to the early modern period. In this sense, the 'great tradition' is based on the classical tradition of Medieval Scholastic philosophy and the later developments of the

cult among both elites and common people. As a result, the cult of the *Salus* became an important component in the commemoration of Jesuit missions to China. Moreover, it was part of a complex network of devotional imagery popularized in the given period.

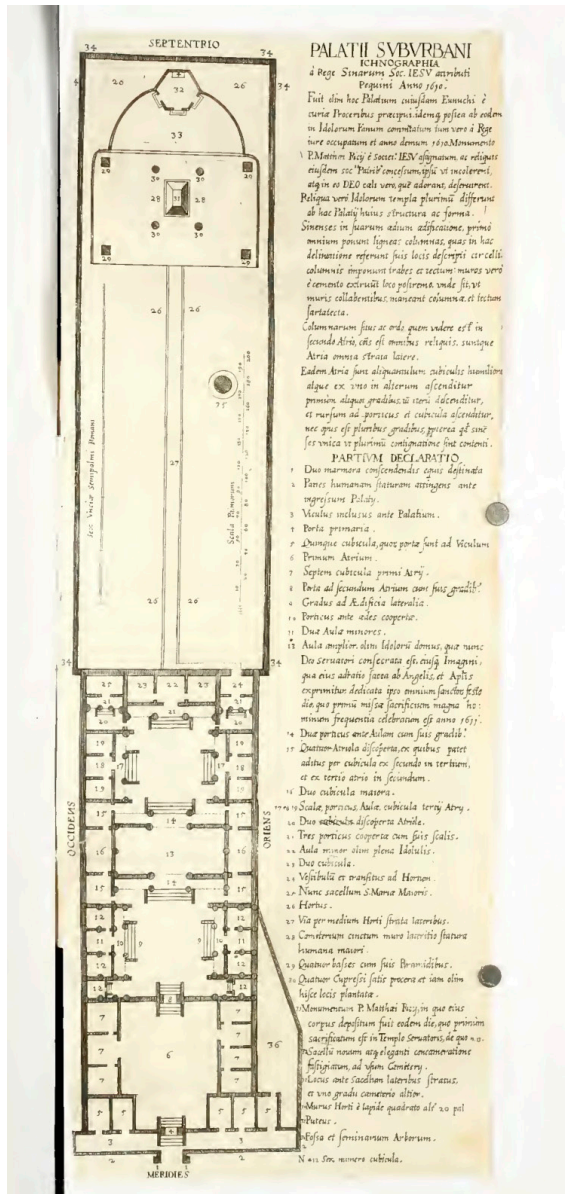


Figure 1. Floor plan of the Zhalan 柵欄 graveyard in Beijing 北京, n. 25 indicates the chapel dedicated to [the Madonna of] Santa Maria Maggiore (*nunc sacellum S. Maria Maioris*) *Palatii suburbani ichnographia à Rege Sinarum Soc. IESV attributi. Pequini Anno 1610* (Ichnography of the suburban palace donated by the Chinese King to the Society of Jesus. Beijing, 1610). Source: Nicolas Trigault, *De christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, 1615, 638-639, <https://archive.org/details/dechristianaexpe00ricc/page/n661/mode/lup>, consulted on January 12, 2022.

Matteo Ricci was, in fact, one of the earliest promoters of transmitting replicas of the *Salus Populi Romani*, which he brought directly from Rome and presented both in India and in China during his travels. The *Salus Populi Romani* was also associated with

the city of Rome, and its initial “heavenly” imagery¹². In fact, as pointed out by Akira Akiyama¹³ and Mia Mochizuki¹⁴, it was part of a collective phenomenon indicating a relationship between the original painting held in Rome and its manifold copies spread around the world. Moreover, the *Salus Populi Romani* was considered by the Jesuits to be an ancient picture of the Mother of God painted by Saint Luke, unlike, for example, the painting of the Madonna with Child and St. John, which was regarded as modern¹⁵. The Jesuit missionaries were, therefore, aware of the traditional relevance of the *Salus*, as well as its miraculous effects. The production of local prints of the *Salus Populi Romani* and other devotional images present in Europe starting in the 17th century, including, for example, the Spanish Netherlands¹⁶, was an important component of the circulation of the images in East Asia¹⁷. Moreover, it was part of a network comprising numerous Roman Catholic devotional images brought from Europe to East Asia that were also produced *in loco* by Jesuit or indigenous painters, especially in Japan and the Philippines¹⁸. From this time on, devotional Marian images started to be produced in China as well, along with other artifacts. One of the most well-known expressions of this popularization is the so-called *Salus Populi Sinensis* or *Xi'an Madonna*, which represented the *Salus Populi Romani* with Chinese features on a silk scroll¹⁹. Still, these images were available mostly to the elites as was the case for the *Salus Populi Sinensis* or the oil on canvas copies brought from Europe. They were visible to commoners only in religious residences or churches established by the Jesuit missionaries. For this reason, cheap prints and woodcuts were a crucial component of the spread of devotional images within early Christian households in China and less wealthy

¹² For a general understanding of the transmission of the importance of the city of Rome to China during the given period, see Pasquale M. D’Elia. “Roma Presentata Ai Letterati Cinesi Da Matteo Ricci S.I.”, *T’oung Pao* 41, no. 1-3 (1952): 149-190.

¹³ Akira Akiyama, “The ‘Afterlife’ of Sacred Christian Images in Japan”, *Annual Report of the Center for Evolving Humanities: Study of Cultural Exchange* (2007): 137.

¹⁴ See Mia M. Mochizuki, “Sacred Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The *Salus Populi Romani* Madonna in the World”, *Kyoto Studies in Art History* (2016): 133.

¹⁵ This has been taken from D’Elia, who mentioned a group of objects listed by Fr. Giulio Aleni S.J. (Ai Rulüe 艾儒略, 1582-1649) donated to the emperor by Ricci and his religious brothers. See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 123. See also Antonio De Caro, “(Re-) producing conversion from Rome to Beijing. Stories Related to Replicas of the *Salus Populi Romani* in the Late-sixteenth Century”, *Convivium* 8, no. 2 (2021): 156-157.

¹⁶ Sarah Moran, “Bringing the Counter-Reformation Home: The Domestic Use of Artworks at the Antwerp Beguinage in the Seventeenth Century”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 38, no. 3 (2015): 152.

¹⁷ See John McCall, “Early Jesuit art in the Far East IV: in China and Macao before 1635”, *Artibus Asiae*, no. 1-2 (1948): 47-48.

¹⁸ Refer to Alexandra Curvelo, “Copy to Convert. Jesuit’s Missionary Artistic Practice in Japan”, *The Culture of Copying in Japan. Critical and historical perspectives*, edited by Rupert Cox (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁹ See Hui-Hung Chen, “Shaping the Anthropological Context of the ‘Salus populi Sinensis’ Madonna Icon in Xian, China” in *Encounters between Jesuits and Protestants in Asia and the Americas*, edited by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Robert Aleksander Maryks, and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia (Boston: Brill, 2018), 90-116.

families. As a result, on January 9, 1606, Matteo Ricci gave copies of four religious images to a producer of ink drawings, including a devotional image of Mother Mary (a copy of *Nuestra Señora de la Antigua*, Fig. 2)²⁰. The fact that it was Ricci himself who donated all these images has been contested by Li-chiang Li, who rather suggested that they had been received prior to Ricci's donation, with the exception of the image representing the Madonna²¹. Thus, the Jesuit missionaries' approach, especially in relation to devotional images, included not only the spread of the cult of Marian devotional images among the elite, which was a crucial component of the mission, but also among the lower social classes.



Figure 2. *Nuestra Señora de la Antigua*, Ink Garden of Mr. Cheng (Cheng-Shi Mo-Yuan 程氏墨苑 1605), by Cheng Dayue 程大約 (1541-1616) with contributions from Matteo Ricci. Source: Berthold Laufer, *Christian art in China*, (Beijing: Licoph Service 1939), fig. 5.

The practice of popularizing Marian devotional images was also intertwined with the production of statues²². For example, in October 1581, Fr. Michele

Ruggieri S.J. (Luo Mingjian 羅明堅, 1543-1607) and his confrère transformed a pagoda in the residence where they lived into a chapel. They placed an altar in the chapel, with a bronze statue depicting the “Holy Virgin with Child (*Beatissima Vergine col figliuolo in braccio*)” which had been molded in Guangzhou 廣州²³. Moreover, the elites who saw oil paintings representing Marian devotional pictures carried by Jesuit missionaries wanted to take copies of these devotional images for private use. For example, in 1600, the wife of a notable Mandarin, after dreaming about an unspecified idol with two children at his sides, asked for a copy of a picture of the Madonna with the Child and St. John that her husband had seen in the missionaries' boat. So, “she wanted to ask permission to have a painter from that city make a copy of that picture. Yet, since the religious fathers believed that he could not make an acceptable copy, and especially because they could not stay there any longer, they gave her a wonderful copy, done by a young [painter] from our religious residence²⁴. Looking at the picture, the viceroy was extremely glad, and he mentioned that he would put it in his home in order to be worshiped, and he thanked the religious fathers for this gift²⁵. The personal usage of Marian devotional images in East Asia led to the production of elaborate oratories meant for the home use of wealthy families or for religious purposes, like in the case of the ‘Nanban’ hanging oratory (Fig. 3), attributed to the school of the Italian painter Giovanni Nicolao (1560-1626) located in the Japanese city of Nagasaki²⁶. The Jesuit missionaries also brought portable altars, even on ships, on their journeys to China, in order to celebrate mass in different locations. We are unaware of the specific details of the portable altars that were used in the given period by Jesuit missionaries in China; however, one later example of these altars, dated between the 17th and 18th centuries, has been preserved in Lisbon (Fig. 4a and Fig. 4b). On the other hand, portable altars were also accessible to the lower classes, who were able to see them and, sometimes, even bring them in their own homes. Devotional images and objects were then put on the altars, or very close to them, and used for liturgy or proselytizing. As we will see, in the absence of devotional images on the altar, indigenous Christian believers adopted alternative strategies, like the use of Chinese characters inscribed on a wooden tablet, as substitutes.

²³ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 152.

²⁴ According to D'Elia, this was the Chinese painter Emmanuel Pereira (You Wenhui 遊文輝, 1575-1633), who famously painted a portrait of Matteo Ricci, now held at the Chiesa del Gesù in Rome.

²⁵ “Volsè mandare a ritrar quella imagine d'un pintore di quella città; ma parendo ai Padri che non avrebbe potuto far questo si bene, specialmente non potendo fermarsi quivi niente, gliene diedero una che aveva fatto in casa un giovane di nostra casa, assai bella. Con la quale il Vicerè restò assai contento, dicendo che l'avevano da adorare in sua casa, dando ai Padri molte gratie per questo”. *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 105.

²⁶ See Alexandra Curvelo, “Nagasaki. An European artistic city in early modern Japan”, *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, no. 2 (2001): 23-35.

²⁰ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 1, 34.

²¹ Li-chiang Li, “The proliferation of images. The ink-stick designs and the printing of the Fang-Shih Mo-P'u, and the Ch'eng-Shih Mo-Yuan” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1998, v. 1, 202.

²² Interestingly, according to Jesuit accounts, the local population also made two marble statues depicting the Jesuit missionaries who reached China, one depicting Fr. Michele Ruggieri S.J. and the other one depicting Fr. Matteo Ricci S.J. (“due statue di marmo, l'una del P. Ruggieri, l'altra del P. Ricci, scolpite al naturale”) *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 244. These statues were used to commemorate the arrival of the missionaries, but there is no evidence of them being used for worshipping the religious fathers, even in later periods.



Figure 3. 'Nanban' hanging oratory, Japan, late 16th century. Source: ©Museum of Portuguese Decorative Arts – Fundação Ricardo do Espírito Santo, Lisbon, Portugal.



Figure 4a. *Chest for a Portable Altar for maritime journeys*, 17th or 18th century, Lisbon, ©Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre Museum, inv. 107. Source: ©Francisco Romão (author of the images), Lisbon, Portugal.



Figure 4b. *Chest for a Portable Altar for maritime journeys*, 17th or 18th century, Lisbon, ©Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre Museum, inv. 107. Source: ©Francisco Romão (author of the images), Lisbon, Portugal.

Concerning devotional images brought to China, these works of art and pictures depicting the Madonna caused confusion both among the Roman Catholic missionaries and the local population²⁷. In fact, in 1556, the Dominican missionary Gaspar da Cruz (1520-1570) mistook a statue of Guanyin 觀音, a Buddhist Bodhisattva, as one of the Madonna²⁸. Some early Chinese observers in Nanjing even believed that the Marian painting brought by Ricci, probably a copy of the *Salus Populi Romani*, was the image of a female goddess venerated by the Jesuit missionaries²⁹. Song Gang clearly showed how this was a result of the strategy adopted by the Jesuit missionaries, who tolerated the association between the popular worship of Guanyin and the newly arrived cult of Mother Mary. In fact, “as long as the confusion did not lead to a ‘dangerous idol-worship’, they [i.e., the Jesuit missionaries] would tolerate ‘friendly’ misunderstandings of the Chinese commoners. It served as a broader conversion to Christianity, and in one way reflected the conflict of negotiation between Catholicism and native religions”³⁰. As a result, the lower strata of society were also able to retain devotional images in their households, especially cheap prints, that depicted Marian images, as well as small crosses, crucifixes, and other devotional images. According to Pasquale D’Elia, there were also other prints showing Christ the Savior, owned by a large number of Christians from different social strata in the city of Nanchang 南昌 around 1607³¹.

As mentioned previously, the local indigenous Christian communities sometimes used Chinese characters carved on tablets to substitute devotional images. In this regard, Ricci shared an interesting episode that happened in 1583 in the city of Zhaoqing 肇慶, in Guangdong province, at the very beginning of his mission:

Close to the temple of Tianning [*Tianning si* 天寧寺] – where the religious fathers used to live– there lived a brilliant young boy. His family name was Cin [Chen 陳]³² and

his first name was Nicò³³. Since he was so close to the religious fathers for all those months –and he befriended them [the Jesuit missionaries]– they thought to make him a Christian if they decided to remain there. As a result, [the fathers] taught him several doctrines concerning our holy Catholic faith and led him to believe in it. Consequently, once they [i.e., the religious fathers] departed, they left an altar there where they used to celebrate Mass, as they would have done for a Christian believer. When we came to visit him again, we found out that he had placed this altar in a hall in his home. Since he did not have any other [devotional] image, he inscribed two big Chinese characters on a tablet in the middle of the wall, meaning: *The Lord of Heaven* [*Tianzhu* 天主]. He set seven or eight lamps on the altar to be lighted, then he spread fragrances in the air and he adored and worshiped the God he had heard about³⁴.

The portable altar used by the Jesuit missionaries became an object in Nicò’s household. Interestingly, he used the term *Tianzhu* 天主 inscribed on a tablet, the same term used by the missionaries to China to translate the Christian personal God, in substitution of the devotional images the religious fathers carried during their travels. In this way, the altar became part of his own devotional practices, and Chinese characters became a clear indication of the presence of a sacred space in the home, together with candles and perfume on the altar.

3. Using images to save the soul: the popularization of the cross and the use of apotropaic images

Christian devotional images were considered apotropaic among the lower classes as well, including even merchants and less elite contexts. The Jesuit missionaries, including Ricci, promoted the idea that devotional images could cast away demons and were effective in healing the body as well as the soul. For example, Ricci was looking for a residence in the city of Nanjing. They told him there was a palace, but it was full of ghosts and demons, so the landlord was not able to sell it. Subsequently, that very palace was offered to Ricci, on the condition that he was not afraid of demons. So, “he said that ‘he served God, the Lord of Heaven and Earth [*Tiandizhu* 天地主], and was confident that his Lord would help him. In this way, no demon could harm him, especially if he kept images of the Savior of the world [*che aveva seco immagini del Salvatore del mondo*] that the devil would want to escape from [...]’”³⁵. The process of casting demons away from the palace was also described in greater detail:

³³ He was baptized on November 21, 1584 by Fr. Michele Ruggieri S. J. with the Christian name of Giovanni (John) and was one of the first Chinese believers to be baptized by the Jesuit missionaries in China. See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 219.

³⁴ See: *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 185-186, translation by the author.

³⁵ “Disse il Padre che ‘Egli serviva a Dio, Signore del cielo e della terra [*Tiandizhu* 天地主], e confidava in questo suo Signore che l’avrebbe aiutato, e nessun demonio gli avrebbe potuto far male, specialmente che aveva seco immagini del Salvatore del mondo, dalle quali il demonio fuggir soleva [...]’”. *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 84, modified.

²⁷ For an analysis of the complex relationship between perceptions of the Madonna and Guanyin during the late Ming dynasty, see Song Gang “Between Bodhisattva and Christian Deity: Guanyin and the Virgin Mary in Late Ming China”. In *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess: Goddess Traditions of Asia*, edited by Deepak Shimkhada and Phyllis K. Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 101-120. Consult also: Song Gang, “The Many Faces of Our Lady: Chinese Encounters with the Virgin Mary between 7th and 17th Centuries,” *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies*, 66, no. 2 (2018): 303-356.

²⁸ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 398.

²⁹ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 194. D’Elia mentions a partial passage from Zhang Geng 張庚 (1685-1760) in his *Guochao huazhenglu* 國朝畫徵錄, that was mentioned in its entirety by Hui-hung Chen, where the painting of Mother Mary was clearly mistaken for a female deity. See Chen Hui-Hung 陳慧宏, “Liang fu yeshuishi de Shengmu shengxiang: jianlun Mingmo tianzhujiao de ‘zongjiao’” 兩幅耶穌會士的聖母聖像: 兼論明末天主教的「宗教」 (“Two Jesuit Madonna icons: Religious dimensions of Catholicism in late-Ming China”), *Taida lishi xuebao* 臺大歷史學報 59 (2017): 84-85.

³⁰ Song Gang “Between Bodhisattva and Christian Deity: Guanyin and the Virgin Mary in Late Ming China.”, 102.

³¹ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 258.

³² According to the interpretation of D’Elia.

Once the religious fathers entered [the palace], they enclosed the area surrounding the altar, located in the hall, and prayed throughout the night. They sprinkled holy water throughout the house and took out the image of Christ the Savior. Through His clemency and the exaltation of His holy faith, He desired that a spirit would never appear [in the palace], or any other diabolical entity to bother the fathers, since everyone was observing what was happening there³⁶.

The same thing happened regarding the private usage of devotional images with a clear apotropaic purpose in indigenous Christian communities. In Shanghai, a woman being chased by a demon that did not allow her to sleep nor eat was urged by a Christian neophyte to join the Roman Catholic faith. Once she made the sign of the cross and received an image of the cross directly from a Jesuit missionary (*receiving taobem huma imagem della que o Padre lhe mandou*), she was immediately able to cast away the demon. Eventually, she would be baptized and become an important member of the Christian community in Shanghai³⁷. Similarly, the Jesuit missionaries told of other stories about casting away demons using an image of the Holy Cross:

A Christian, before being baptized, burned the idols he kept in his home. The devil wanted to take vengeance for this. As a result –since God did not allow the devil to do anything else– he made rice disappear while the Christian was cooking and let him see just water, which became black like coal. This happened three or four times. So, he went to seek guidance from the religious father, who gave him an image of the Holy Cross [*o qual lhe deu huma imagem da Santa Cruz*] to bring it back to that place. The devil, being unable to cope with this, immediately stopped disturbing the Christian believer³⁸.

In addition, Matteo Ricci was aware of the popular apotropaic practices adopting the symbol of the cross already present in China, which were a legacy of previous Christian denominations that reached China before the 16th century³⁹. In fact, according to Jesuit accounts, the missionaries “knew, as something extremely likely, that it was a common habit in different places in China to paint a black cross on children’s foreheads to protect them from bad things [*E seppero, per cosa assai certa, esser custume in molti luoghi della Cina fare ai fanciulli piccoli una croce nera nella fronte per defenderli da qualche disgratia*]⁴⁰. As described by Michael Shin, this protective and apotropaic power was also related to the image of the *Salvator Mundi*. In fact, “once the Chinese understood the mystery of the incarnation (manifested in the image of the *Salvator Mundi*) and accepted the new faith through baptism, the image of the Savior became a new agent of protective power

in the house. Since its residents now recognized and served the Christian Lord, the ‘family’ ghosts left the house, giving way to Christ, who took over dominion of the place⁴¹.

Similarly, in the given period, the symbol of the cross became widespread in East Asia, in general, and in China specifically⁴². In China, the spread of images representing the Passion of Christ and His crucifixion found more opposition, together with practices of the mortification of the flesh⁴³, but still, the cult of the cross and spread of crucifixes and other objects became an important component in the daily life of indigenous Christian communities⁴⁴. In fact, according to D’Elia, Fr. Diego de Pantoja S.J. (Pang Diwo 龐迪我, 1571-1618) published his *Pangzi yiquan* 龐子遺銓 (*Notes left by Master Pang*)⁴⁵ in 1610, com-

⁴¹ Michael Junhyoung Shin, “The Jesuits and the Portrait of God in Late Ming China”, *The Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 2 (2014): 221. Moreover, as pointed out by d’Elia, in the *Tianzhu shengjiao qimeng* 天主聖教啟蒙 (*Rudiments on the Sacred Teaching of the Lord of Heaven*, 1619), João da Rocha (Luo Ruwang 羅儒望, 1565–1623) clearly expresses the idea that the symbol of the cross should be honored by all Christian believers. See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 384.

⁴² For the Chinese context, this became even more evident in the mid–and late– 17th century. Liam Matthew Brockey describes the inauguration ceremony of a church in Fujian province in 1657. This is an important example of the diffusion of Roman Catholic images and artifacts, including crosses, in different locations across the Chinese empire. Moreover, it shows the importance of transferring devotional images from one church to another and their continuous popularization, also during the Qing dynasty. “For example, the church that Simão da Cunha opened in 1657 in Yanping, Fujian Province, mirrored the public orientation of the new court edifice. In contrast to Cunha’s old church with its discreet entrance, this building was palatial, the former residence of a Christian mandarin who had donated it to the community of his local coreligionists. It sat in the heart of the city, in such a manner that when the main door is opened in the day–time, it is known to all people, Christians and heathens alike.” At the inauguration ceremony, on November 1, 1657, Cunha staged a procession to transfer the sacred images from the old church to the new one. A literatus led the way, bearing the banner of the Holy Cross, while two pairs of other literati processed with paintings depicting a guardian angel and the Blessed Virgin. The priest marched behind the images, leading a train of Christians who carried incense and rosary beads. In their wake came a clutch of non-Christian musicians who had been hired for the occasion, “celebrating their creator on that day without knowing Him”. What most impressed Cunha, however, was that a Chinese city had witnessed a public procession which included literati making an unembarrassed profession of the faith they had “learned from a European man.” Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 117.

⁴³ Concerning the rejection of crucifixion scenes and the complex reactions of Chinese believers and non-Christian Chinese to images of the Passion of Christ, see Anthony Clark, “Early Modern Chinese Reactions to Western Missionary Iconography”, *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 30, no. 5 (2008): 5-22.

⁴⁴ In Europe, in the debate between Jansenists and the Jesuits, the latter were often accused of preaching the Gospel by suppressing the suffering of Jesus, and therefore also the crucifix and the symbol of the cross and preaching an edulcorated image of the Gospel, showing only the glorious image of Christ after his resurrection. This was famously mentioned by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). See Andrés I. Prieto, “The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World”, *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4, no. 3 (2017): 395-396. Even though there were some initial difficulties in the transmission and explanation of the passion of Christ, these debates seem to wittingly exaggerate the accommodationist approach of the Jesuit missionaries to discredit their mission.

⁴⁵ I use the translation of the title adopted by Song Gang. See Song Gang, *Giulio Aleni, Kouduo richao, and Christian-Confucian Dialo-*

³⁶ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 86, translation by the author.

³⁷ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 512.

³⁸ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 513, translation by the author.

³⁹ According to D’Elia, the Christians that Ricci mentions in his journals are probably Greek-speaking ones who came to China at the end of the 13th century under the reign of Kublai Khan (1215-1294, r. 1260-1294). See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 319.

⁴⁰ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 320.

prising a narration of the Passion of Christ, proving that mentions of Christ's crucifixion were present in Beijing as well⁴⁶. Still, some local authorities clearly rejected the symbol of the cross as a 'magical' evil tool. For example, the eunuch Ma Tang 馬堂 suspected that the crucifix was used as a magical device to murder the emperor⁴⁷ and, as a result, the inhabitants of Shaozhou 邵州 asked not to receive the a crucifix in that area. Later, after being instructed about the doctrine of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ by the Jesuit missionaries, several of them started to worship it⁴⁸. An interesting detail shared by the Jesuit missionaries was the fact that the crucifix the eunuch Ma Tang found was painted red, like blood, and "seemed to be alive" (*che pareva vivo*)⁴⁹. On the other hand, in Japan, the practice of self-flagellation became part of the indigenous Christian communities, alongside images depicting the Passion of Christ⁵⁰.

In addition to those sources, recent archeological excavations, started in 2016 in the Shangchuan Island in Guangdong province, and probably dating to the mid-late 16th century, show a depiction of a cross in a blue-and-white porcelain fragment (Fig. 5)⁵¹. Similar pieces have been found in Penny's Bay, Lantau Island, Hong Kong and the areas around Shangchuan Island (Fig. 6)⁵². Moreover, as Dong Shaoxin showed in his work on porcelain Christian images during the 16th and 17th century⁵³, these images had a

gism in Late Ming Fujian (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁶ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 92.

⁴⁷ "Il Mathan, più crudele di tutti, a ogni cosa che ritrovava di novo che non gli avevano mostrata, si lamentava molto adirato, come se avesse ritrovato qualche cosa che i Padri gli avessero furata a lui; tutto quanto gli piaceva, pigliava e guardava in un'altra parte. E, vedendo che non vi era cosa pretiosa, come egli desiderava, molto più restò pieno di vergogna e di ira. Quello che fece più maravigliare a tutti, e diede magior travaglio ai Nostri, fu ritrovare tra le nostre cose un molto bello Crocifisso, intagliato in legno e pinto col sangue, che pareva vivo. Qui cominciò il crudele eunuco a gridare e dire: 'Questo è il fatticcio che avete fatto per amazzare il nostro Re; non è questa buona gente che anda con queste arti'. E nel vero pensò lui esser questo qualche cosa cattiva [...]. Non si voleva l'eunuco con niente acquetare, condannando quel fatto, e dicendo che meritavano quegli huomini esser castigati. Quello con che venne a lasciare alquanto la mala suspitione, fu vedere altri Crocifissi che stavano nelle casse, che ivano scoprendo quei che buscavano le casse, si scolpiti come pinti, parendogli pure che non potrebbero esser tutti fatticci" *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 116.

⁴⁸ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 224-225.

⁴⁹ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 116.

⁵⁰ See Michael Junyoung Shin, "The Passion and Flagellation in Sixteenth-Century Japan", *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance Et Réforme* 36, no. 2 (2013): 5-43.

⁵¹ For a broader perspective on the archeological findings of porcelain in East Asia, see Li Min, "Fragments of Globalization: Archaeological Porcelain and the Early Colonial Dynamics in the Philippines", *Asian Perspectives* 52, no. 1 (2013): 43-74.

⁵² For fragments found both in Shangchuan island and in Penny Bay, Lantau Island, Hong Kong S.A.R., China, See Ji Duxue 吉笃学, "Shangchuan dao Huawanping yicun niandai deng wenti xintan" 上川岛花碗坪遗存年代等问题新探 ("New Explorations on the Date of the Remains of the Huawangping Site on Shangchuan Island"), *Wenwu* 文物, no. 8 (2017): 59-68. Xiao Dashun 肖达顺 et alii, "Guangdong Taishan Shangchuan dao Dazhouwan yizhi" 广东台山上川岛大洲湾遗址 ("Remains of the site of Dazhouwan in the island of Shangchuan, Taishan, Guangdong province"), *Wenwu* 文物, no. 2 (2018): 23-38.

⁵³ See Dong Shaoxin 董少新, "Ming Qing shiqi jidujiao zhuti ciqi zai kaocha" 明清时期基督教主题瓷器再考察 ("Restudy on Christian

variety of different uses, both in Europe and in China. For example, the Christogram IHS (that is, the abbreviation of IHΣΟΥΣ, i.e. Jesus, commonly used by the Society of Jesus) was present in more elite daily objects, produced in Spain, like bowls (Fig. 7)⁵⁴. Starting in the 16th century, Jesuit missionaries, European merchants, and members of other Roman Catholic religious orders also requested the impression of religious symbols and images from several Chinese porcelain factories in China, in order to use these objects both for liturgical and daily purposes. Those objects were then sent to Europe or used in China or East Asia. From the beginning of the 18th century, they were produced on a larger scale⁵⁵. Similar bowls to the one produced in Spain (Fig. 8a) – sometimes destined for the Portuguese market – depicted the Christogram IHS (Fig. 8b) together with the Portuguese coat of arms and an armillary sphere, combining them with creatures inspired by Chinese folklore. Moreover, crucifixes became more accessible to different strata of the local population, and, at times, they were kept in simple boxes (Fig. 9). More elaborate crucifixes, especially in Macau, became an important vehicle of the Christian presence in the city, and contrasted with the simple crucifixes owned by the lower classes.

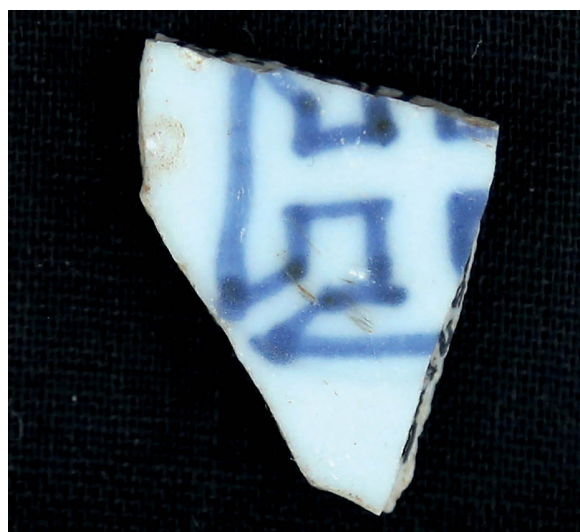


Figure 5. A fragment of a blue-and-white porcelain decorated with a cross, 16th century circa⁵⁶. Source: ©Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

images in Chinese porcelain during 16-19 centuries"), *Kuawenhua meishushi nianjian "Ouluoba" de dansheng* 跨文化美术史年: "欧罗巴"的鉴诞生 (*Annals of Transcultural History of Art: How was Europe made?*), v. 2 (2021), 327-368. I adopt here the translation of the titles into English provided directly by the author.

⁵⁴ See Dong, "Ming Qing shiqi jidujiao zhuti ciqi zai kaocha", 335.

⁵⁵ See Teresa Canepa, *Christian Images in Chinese Porcelain / Images do Cristianismo na Porcelana da China* (London: Jorge Welsh Oriental Porcelain and Works of Art, 2003).

⁵⁶ Image retrieved from: Xiao Dashun, "Blue-and-white porcelain on Shangchuan Island: Chinese-Portuguese trade during the Ming dynasty", *IAS Newsletter*, 86, Summer 2020 (<https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/blue-and-white-porcelain-shangchuan-island-chinese-portuguese-trade-during>, Consulted on April 29, 2021).

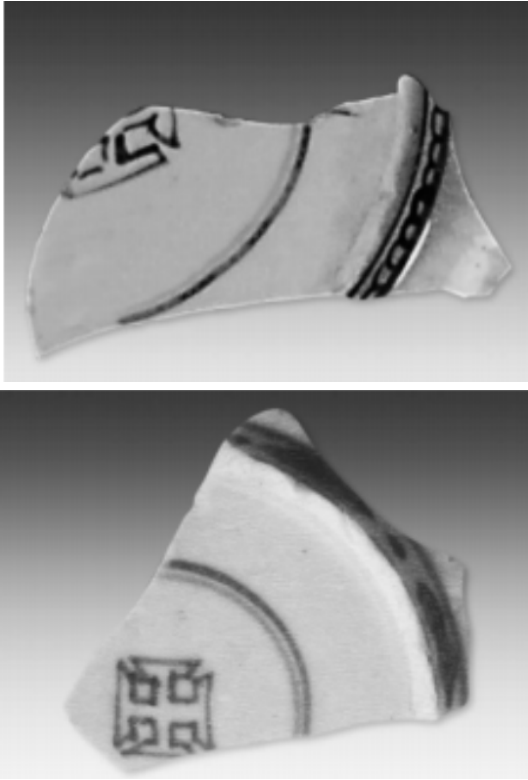


Figure 6. *Fragments of a blue-and-white porcelain decorated with a cross, 16th century circa.* Source: ©Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology⁵⁷.



Figure 7. *Bowl inscribed at the center with the Christogram IHS, Manises, Spain, 1430-1470 circa.* Source: ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 8a. *Dish with IHS monogram, armillary sphere, and Portuguese royal arms Ming empire, 1520-1540 circa.* Source: ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 8b. *Detail of the dish, IHS Ming empire, 1520-1540 circa.* Source: ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 9. *Covered Box Containing Figure of Christ in bronze, Ming dynasty, 15th or 16th century.* Source: ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Together with this belief related to crucifixes and their use, there were often miraculous tales that accompanied these devotional images, narrating their healing effects. Interestingly, despite the initial aversion for the

⁵⁷ Image retrieved from: Ji, “Shangchuan dao Huawanping yicun nian-dai deng wenti xintan”, 66, fig. 13.

symbol of the cross, these miraculous stories not only related to Marian images⁵⁸ but also to the image of the Holy Cross⁵⁹. This happened with images of the Savior as well:

The Lord provided the same mercy to another unbeliever who had a Christian son. Since his son could not persuade him to believe in God, the unbeliever decided to offer incense to his idols. The son, seeing this, took the image of the Savior and worshipped it, reverencing it and reciting prayers for the health of his father. The same night, the father apparently saw the Lord. He had previously seen Him in that image [so he recognized Him], and the Lord told him that He wanted to help him. His health then immediately and drastically improved, and he was later completely healed. His son came from two leagues away, from the place where this happened to our chapel, in order to thank the Lord, informing the Jesuit missionary about his father's decision to become a Christian⁶⁰.

A Chinese convert, named Luca (Luke), combined the use of relics brought by the Jesuit missionaries and crosses, with the idea of replicating the image of the Savior. He proposed to all his family members to be portrayed in a picture; in order to convince them to be converted to Christianity, he told them expressly that they could not be painted in the picture if they did not convert to Christianity. In the end, many of them were converted, and were “portrayed naturally with rosaries in their hands and with crosses [given to them by Luca] and a reliquary around their neck”⁶¹. In the middle of the family picture, there was a painted image of the Savior (*nel mezzo del quale pingere l'immagine del Salvatore*). Moreover, relics produced from the fragments of the Holy Cross were brought by Ricci on his journey to Beijing and were eventually donated to the emperor. He took them from the reliquary before his departure and described them as being “many pieces of the blessed Cross of Christ, unified together, that made up a well-crafted cross” (*molti pezzi della Croce di Cristo benedetto, uniti insieme, che facevano una crocetta assai buona*)⁶². These relics of the blessed Cross would then be presented to the emperor, together with a cross filled with precious stones, polychrome glass, and relics of various saints⁶³.

Despite Ricci's positive expectations, some local authorities posed two main criticisms regarding this gift offered to the emperor. The first argument was that the reliability of the relics themselves was questionable, since saints, they believed, could not have bones. In addition,

they criticized the relics as an inappropriate gift, as it was inauspicious and therefore forbidden to bring a relic onto the premises of the imperial palace (令入宮禁)⁶⁴. Interestingly, this second criticism directly mentioned an argument from the famous Confucian scholar Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) from the Tang dynasty, who considered it inappropriate for a bone relic of the Buddha to enter the premises of the imperial palace, since it was inauspicious and polluted⁶⁵. In fact, Han Yu, commenting on the possible arrival of a Buddhist relic, the finger bone of the Buddha, rhetorically asked: “all the more, now that he has been dead for a long time [i.e., the Buddha], how can his withered and decayed bones and baleful and filthy remains be allowed into the forbidden palace?”⁶⁶.

4. Casting away demons: from the destruction of idols to exorcisms

The spread of Christian devotional images and objects was also accompanied by the destruction of “pagan” images that Jesuit missionaries and the Christian communities in China constantly pursued. On several occasions, this was done in order to “purify” a specific place or household⁶⁷. For example, after Zhalan was chosen as an appropriate location for the burial of Fr. Matteo Ricci S.J., the Jesuit missionaries burned ‘pagan’ pictures and broke clay idols⁶⁸. The picture of Christ the Savior then substituted the statues depicting ‘pagan’ deities after the process of purification⁶⁹. Later on, in 1623, Fr. Francisco Furtado S. J. (Fu Fanji 傅汎濟, 1589 circa-1653), in his annual letter, recalled a similar practice, adopting the image of the Savior (*imagem do Saldavor*), crucifixes (*cruzes*), and names of Christ impressed on paper

⁶⁴ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 147.

⁶⁵ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 147. This is related to the infamous memorial *Lun fo gu biao* 《論佛骨表》 (*Memorial on the Buddha's Relics*) submitted to the throne in 819. In this memorial, Han Yu heavily criticized Buddhism and Buddhist relics as futile, dangerous, and inauspicious objects. “I pray that [Your Majesty] will have the relic delivered to the government agency concerned, which will depose of it in water or fire so as to permanently destroy its roots. If [Your Majesty] puts to rest doubts under Heaven and stops once and for all [Buddhism] from deluding posterity, all under Heaven will be aware of the achievement by you the great sage, which is hundreds of millions of times greater than that of ordinary people. Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that cause for joy? If the Buddha should possess soul and the power to cause misfortunes, let all such calamities be visited upon your servant. Let Heaven be the witness: your servant shall never regret it”. See Victor Cunrui Xiong, 52. Han Yu, “A Memorial on the Relic of the Buddha” in *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, edited by Victor H. Mair, Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt and Paul R. Goldin, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 357.

⁶⁶ Refer to Xiong, 52. Han Yu, “A Memorial on the Relic of the Buddha”, 357. For the same passage, Consult also: “況其身死已久、枯朽之骨、凶穢之餘、豈宜令入宮禁” See: *Gu jin wen chao* 古今文鈔 (*Ancient and Modern literary records*) edited by Wu Zeng Qi 吳曾祺 (Taipei: Wen guang tushu gongsi, 1970), v. 3, 1511.

⁶⁷ This was often done by purifying the pagodas and setting “pagan” images on fire. See *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, edited by Pietro Tacchi Venturi, v. 1, 330.

⁶⁸ “Idola igitur a Nostris arae detracta, lignea flammis, lutea pulveri tradita sunt”, *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 625.

⁶⁹ “Pridie eius diei, imago inauratis [strijis] inclusa, restituendo Deo vivo et vero suo culto, in simulacrorum locum restituitur”, *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 626.

⁵⁸ See *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, edited by Pietro Tacchi Venturi, (Macerata: Giorgetti, 1911-13), v. 2, 481-482; 256; 270; Ricci, Matteo, *Lettere*, (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), 371-380 and 389-394.

⁵⁹ Refer to “Nosso Senhor ajudou mui especialmente esta nova christandade com raros acontecimentos, principal mente por meio da sua Santa Crus. Tinha adoecido hum christiio de humas terciis juntamente com hum seu filho; mandou elle pedir ao Padre a imagem da santa Crus, a qual rece bendo com grande devociio, ficou logo livre mais o filho”, See: *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 512.

⁶⁰ See: *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 515, translation by the author.

⁶¹ Refer to “[...] ritratti al naturale con le corone nelle mani, con sue crocette et un reliquiario al collo”, *Fonti Ricciane*, v.2, 482.

⁶² See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 121.

⁶³ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 123.

(*nomes de Jesus impressos*) in order to clean a residence (*limpou a casa*)⁷⁰.

These practices, adopted throughout the Jesuit missionaries' stay in China, caused a rejection in the local communities, who often reacted with anger to the destruction of the idols. For example, in the village of Jingcun 靖村, there was an insurgence against Fr. Nicolò Longobardo S.J. (Long Huamin 龍華民, 1559-1654), carried out by a group of Buddhist believers. Given a prolonged period of drought in the region due to lack of rain, these believers sought advice from a fortune teller, who told them it was because Guanyin was offended at having her shoulders burnt⁷¹. This was a clear indication of the burning of images of Guanyin and other deities perpetuated by the Christians. For this reason, the insurgents attacked the whole Christian community, especially Fr. Longobardo and his Christian Chinese assistant, Mario. Once they reached the village where this riot happened, Longobardo and Mario found a group of Christians, who said to the rioters: "Since we were able to burn Guanyin, we have more power than her. So, if she is not able to make it rain now, why was she able to do this before, even when we burnt her shoulders? Why does she not pour rain in the places where we did not burn her shoulders?"⁷². According to this account, right after this event, there was as much rain as the villagers desired, and the conditions of the soil improved significantly⁷³. This contrast between Jesuit missionaries and local communities, especially in relation to the burning of "pagan" devotional artifacts or images, was widely reported in Jesuit sources. In fact, according to Jesuit accounts recounting the difficulties faced by Fr. Longobardo in Shaoyzhou, "the main difficulty in this conversion [i.e. of the indigenous population] is the war that our holy law is carrying out against the idols" (*A principal difficulda de nesta conversão foi a guerra que nossa santa lei fas aos pagodes*). As a result, according to the account, although it may have been easy to convince them to adore His image (*adorem a sua imagem*), that is, the image of the Lord, it would still be difficult to convince them to abandon their previous "pagan" devotional pictures⁷⁴. The practice of burning devotional artifacts has been also associated with the conversion of

the indigenous population. If they rejected the "idols", their faith was considered sincere, since the bond with "familial" idols was considered extremely strong by the Jesuit missionaries:

This difficulty [i.e., concerning the cult of idols] increases when we consider that it is widely present everywhere. In fact, it is not enough to forbid [the believers] to worship idols in public temples, or in other pagan ones. It is also necessary to force individuals to reject the idols, the same ones they grew up with, which they keep as protectors of their homes, their *lares* and *penates*. One can tell how much they are truly converted (*Por onde se pode ver quão deveras se convertem*) [to Christianity] by seeing the ones that reach the point of mistreating their familial idols. They do not give them a place, not even among their waste, expect maybe for setting them on fire. The ones who cannot tolerate seeing the smoke or ashes produced by them throw them into the rivers or give them to our religious fathers [i.e., the Jesuit missionaries]⁷⁵.

This was perceived as a threat not only to local rituals, but to the complex system of ancestral rituals that were a crucial component of dynastic China since ancient times. This is confirmed in anti-Christian writings dated around 1640 by several Buddhist and Confucian scholars, who clearly challenged the disruption of the ritual system in late Ming dynasty China by the Jesuit missionaries⁷⁶. As noted by Paul Cohen⁷⁷, anti-Christian scholars writing after the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries in China borrowed a complex theoretical apparatus from famous authors like Han Yu, as mentioned previously, who criticized Buddhist teachings, stressing the cultural superiority of Confucianism and of "indigenous" and "Chinese" *mores*. As a result, the destruction and destitution of "pagan" rituals encouraged by Jesuit missionaries was perceived rhetorically as an existential threat to Chinese culture itself.

One interesting episode, which combines the clear rejection of idols and the power of the symbol of the cross to cast away demons, was included in the Jesuit account of the mission in Nanchang between 1601 and 1605. According to the account given to us by Ricci, a woman from Nanchang, who was a neighbor of a Christian who rejected the worship of local idols⁷⁸, once asked a fortune teller when her husband would come back. When she received the answer, the devil entered her body (*E ritornata di là con la risposta, entrò in essa il demonio*). As a result, several unspecified non-Christian monks came to the house of the woman, worshiping their idols. On the other hand, her Christian neighbor recited the rosary in front of an image of Christ the Savior in his home. Once he reached the woman's house, he did the sign of the cross on the woman to cast away the demon. Even though he was unsuccessful, the demon clearly said that he was not

⁷⁰ See Shin "The Jesuits and the Portrait of God in Late Ming China", 221. Shin offers both the original Portuguese version and the original version of this important passage of the *littera annua* for the year 1623, dated April 10, 1624. For the English translation, refer to "Other Christians, after receiving the Holy Baptism, brought to their house the Image of the Savior, some Crucifixes, and nominas, and cleaned their house, driving out the idols set on top [of the house altar], and put on the place the Image, crucifixes, and nominas. For the following three nights, they heard in the middle of the night loud noises, as of people running out of the house in a hurry and crossing the river nearby. The Christians could not see any other causes but that the demons were leaving the house, which Christ now owned, the Lord much more powerful than the demons".

⁷¹ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 243.

⁷² "Pois queimamos a Quonyn, podemos mais que ella; e se agora não pôde dar chuva, como a deu os amos atras, quando tãobem lhe queimavamos as costas[?] Ou naquelles lugares aonde não lhas queimarão, como não dá chuva [?]". See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 243.

⁷³ "Emfim foi lá o Padre. Desagastou-se Quonyn; houve tanta chuva como se desejava em lugar de crecer a segura". *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 243.

⁷⁴ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 217.

⁷⁵ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 218-219, translation by the author.

⁷⁶ Paul A. Cohen, "The Anti-Christian Tradition in China" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (1961): 172.

⁷⁷ Cohen, "The Anti-Christian Tradition in China", 170.

⁷⁸ According to Ricci, "he put the chair in the middle of the hall and was sitting with his shoulders towards the statues of the idols". The Italian version: "pose la sedia nel mezzo della sala ponendosi a sedere con le spalle verso gli idoli", *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 335.

afraid of the non-Christian monks, but once the Christian man put his hands on him, the demon in the woman was lowered to the ground (*se abbassò sino al suolo*). The account ends by stating that similar episodes, including the effects of holy water, were widespread in the community of Nanchang⁷⁹. The interaction between devotional images and ‘demonic’ spirits was not a novelty in the popular religious culture of the late Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty. According to Kang Xiaofei, Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715), while describing a shrine dedicated to ‘demonic’ fox spirits (known in Chinese as *huli jing* 狐狸精), shows the predominance of Guanyin over ‘lower’ demonic spirits. According to this description, a painting depicting the Bodhisattva was placed on top of the shrine, and the altar was located on a table right below Guanyin’s picture:

In it, a painting of the bodhisattva Guanyin and two other paintings of unknown armored figures were worshipped. [...] While the image of Guanyin was hung on the wall, the altar of the fox, symbolized by a miniature seat, was set up on a table. The physical positions of the two divinities demonstrated a hierarchical relationship. The image on the wall represented a higher authority, with greater capacity to invoke reverence, but was harder to reach. The altar on the table was less powerful, less worthy, but more accessible. Furthermore, the image of Guanyin was forever present, yet motionless, whereas the fox, though invisible, constantly came and went based on human requests submitted through the medium. The layout of the shrine may reflect the mentality of the people who engaged in cult practices: the fox actively answered worshippers’ pleas, while the presence of the higher deities –however aloof and silent– enhanced the credibility of the cult⁸⁰.

These fox spirits were not always considered evil demonic entities. They were oftentimes portrayed as intermediate shapeshifting creatures, living in a realm between humans and celestial beings⁸¹. Still, the interaction between these demonic beings and divine entities from other religions, especially Buddhism and Daoism, was not always related to enhancing a cult by dominating the fox spirits. Rather, at times, they were understood as evil spirits substituting the real gods, not unlike the Jesuit understanding of “demons” or demonic presences that challenged the cult of the Christian personal God. In fact, Daoist and Buddhist priests practiced various exorcisms in order to cast them away. According to Kang Xiaofei, those exorcistic practices –which are also recorded in anecdotal writings and folk tales– sometimes failed to be truly effective and killing a fox spirit was considered taboo⁸².

In a similar episode, connected to the Jesuit missionaries’ fight against demons, there is a clear contrast between the ineffective images of the ‘pagan’ monks and the effective Christian objects brought by the Jesuit missionaries:

A man who was crossing to the other bank of a river – wandering at night among several graves– was possessed by demons. This was probably due to his fear, or [probably] because he was scared by a demon, or because he imagined there was a demon there who scared him. As a result, his parents called the minister of the idols (i.e. a Buddhist monk) to cast the demon away. He went to offer prayers and performed ceremonies, filling his house with several painted images, which seemed to represent the demons themselves. Still, the man was not healed. Hence, since his father was informed by another Christian about the virtues of Christian teachings, he called a religious father and begged him to heal his son. A religious father went there and –because he did not believe that this person was [truly] possessed– he did not perform any exorcism, but rather removed and burned all the images and everything that the minister of the idols brought into the home. He then recited some prayers to the man and put his own reliquary [as a necklace] around the man’s neck, exhorting him to come to the church and become Christian once he was healed. Since he was healed immediately, he was sent to the church by his father and his father, and all his family became Christian as well. This family was composed of several people, and the news that God had freed him from a demon through the intervention of the religious father spread our fame [in the region]⁸³.

This was another important element in the popularization of Christianity. Christian practices and ideas, including the diffusion of devotional images, substituted existing beliefs about spiritual beings, the efficacy of specific rituals, and even the traditional practice of *fengshui* 風水. Regarding the latter, according to Jesuit accounts, a Confucian literatus, who even fought during the Imjin War in Korea, converted to Roman Catholicism, facing great doubt and difficulty. In fact, he had mastered the art of *fengshui*, which included finding an appropriate place for burial, establishing the foundation of a home, or the right time to do any activity. As a result, the Jesuit missionaries told him that, even though he was so successful in this art, it was actually the fruit of demonic work (*opra del demonio*) and so the literatus, “as if awakened from a great dream, opened his eyes (*come risvegliato di un grande sogno, aperse gli occhi*)⁸⁴. He became a Christian, taking the name of Paul. Interest-

⁷⁹ See *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 335.

⁸⁰ Kang Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox. Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 113-114.

⁸¹ Kang, *The Cult of the Fox. Power...*, 12.

⁸² Kang, *The Cult of the Fox. Power...*, 39. There are also notable exceptions to the taboo of killing fox spirits. For example, according to Mark R. E. Meulenbeld, in vernacular stories from the Yuan dynasty, King Wu of Zhou’s wife, Da Ji, was possessed by a fox spirit and she manipulated him to rise to arms. Only with the execution of the fox spirit does the possession of the woman finally end. See Mark R. E.

Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Manoa: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 85.

⁸³ See: *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 261, translation by the author.

⁸⁴ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 3, 262. The same episode has been also described by Zhang Qiong in her account of the exorcisms performed by Jesuit missionaries against demons. See Zhang, “About God, Demons, and Miracles: The Jesuit Discourse on the Supernatural in Late Ming China” *Early Science and Medicine* 4, no. 1 (1999): 17. Other similar accounts –including the destruction of idols or other ‘supernatural’ events– are also present in Zhang’s article, see Zhang Qiong. “About God, Demons, and Miracles...”, 6-23.

ingly, he publicly burnt all his books concerning divination⁸⁵. The practice of burning books, statuettes, or any object related to non-Christian beliefs, was completed by replacing of those objects with new Christian ones.

5. Conclusions: elusive Christian popular culture

The diffusion of Christian devotional images and their “popularization” by the Jesuit missionaries, is a crucial element in the overall presence of Christianity in China from the 16th century onwards. Despite a clear strategy proposed by the Jesuit missionaries, which aimed to convert members of the Chinese elite, the mass diffusion of Christianity through various devotional objects also reached the lower classes. In contrast to the Western-like replicas of devotional images kept by Chinese elites, commoners were given cheap prints and other similar materials for devotional purposes. At the same time, the production of replicas of devotional images *in loco*, including Marian ones, was meant not only for the Ming dynasty elite, but for commoners as well, who were able to see the works of art in religious residences. Another point of interaction between elites and commoners was the practice of destroying previous “pagan” objects owned by the families who converted to Christianity. This process, which was equally present among the elite and commoners, saw the destruction of books, prints, and statuettes, among other goods, which were then replaced by Christian ones. Jesuit missionaries, in their own terms and by their own practices, tried to make it so Christianity would enroot in the Chinese empire, stemming from a new relationship with devotional images, devotional practices, and even “magical” exorcisms. This new world made of “images” was different, and yet not totally dissimilar, for the previous “popular” one. As Hans Belting points out:

“An ‘image’ is more than a product of perception. It is created as the result of personal or collective knowledge and intention. We live with images, we comprehend the world in images. And this living repertory of our internal images connects with the physical production of external picture that we stage in the social realm”⁸⁶.

The connection between the physical production of external pictures and internal images is a crucial element for the enterprise of the Jesuit missionaries in China as well. Indigenous believers were able to recreate their own religious landscape, inspired by new practices brought by the Catholic missionaries. The miraculous use of relics, the practice of casting away demons, and the usage of devotional images were already present in the Chinese tradition, but Jesuit missionaries reframed those practices.

As stated by Burke, the process of comprehending popular culture in early modern Europe is elusive. In fact, “much of popular culture of this period was oral culture, and ‘words fly away’. Much of it took the form

of festivals, which were equally impermanent”⁸⁷. The same impermanence is present in popular culture in relation to the arrival of Christianity in China starting from the end of 16th century. Stemming from a mainly Scholastic educational system, the Jesuit missionaries who provided an account of the popular reactions towards Christian devotional images saw popular culture through their ‘educated’ lens. At the same time, the access that commoners and elites had to Christian artifacts was extremely different. The elites, as already mentioned, had immediate access to oil paintings and replicas of Western pictures; similarly, they could ask skilled local Chinese painters to reproduce the same pictures for their own personal use. On the contrary, the lower classes could not possess these precious objects, which were, at times, entirely inaccessible to them. Their contact with the objects and pictures was narrated by the Jesuit missionaries, but it remains extremely elusive. We can only imagine the reaction that some Chinese commoners living in Suzhou or Xi’an might have had seeing a foreigner, like Fr. Bento de Góis S.J. (E Bendu 鄂本篤, 1562-1607). In fact, he walked with the letters and signatures of other Jesuit fathers and the formulation of his vows in his turban, “like in a reliquary of the Moros” (*a modo de reliquairo dos mouros*). On his chest, he had a cross and two sentences, one from the Gospel of John, “in principio erat verbum”, and another one from the Gospel of Mark, “euntes in mundum universum”⁸⁸. It is also difficult to imagine the reactions of people in Beijing when the convert Fabio, a wealthy Chinese merchant, received the “most Holy Body of Christ” (*il Santissimo Corpo di Cristo*) for the final time, and when it was given to him after a long procession from the church to his room, with carpets and perfumes along the way, and with Christians holding lit candles⁸⁹.

The actions of Roman Catholic missionaries, including the reproduction of devotional images and religious processions, not only traveled through space, from Europe to China, but also through time, from the medieval world to the early modern one. This distinction, which we set so clearly and artificially, was not perceived as such by the Jesuit missionaries. For them, the presence of relics, the replicas of the *Salus Populi Romani*, among other pictures, the processions of the Eucharist, the worshipping of the crucifix, and other religious practices represented a vivid presence of the Roman Catholic tradition in China. Similarly, Chinese commoners’ perceptions of Christians marked a new encounter, presented to them by the missionaries as being rooted in an ancestral past. The presence of new beliefs was materialized in objects that even commoners could have in their homes. The portable altars that Jesuit missionaries brought on their travels, and that seemed so distant to Chinese converts, slowly became part of the household.

⁸⁷ Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 65.

⁸⁸ *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 401.

⁸⁹ “E facendolo i Padri ponere in una delle sue camere nel letto, ritrovorno che stava già con il polso intercalare. E lasciandolo un puoco riposare, coprimo il camino, dalla chiesa sino alla camera dove stava l’infermo, con tappeti e profumi; et fecero con i christiani con candele accese nelle mani una solenne processione portandogli il Santissimo Sacramento”. *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 2, 350.

⁸⁵ See: *Fonti Ricciane*, v. 3, 262, translation by the author.

⁸⁶ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9.

The world of Christian traditions that was enrooted in Medieval Europe travelled along the commercial roots of a globalized world, more globalized than that of Italian Medieval merchants and Franciscan missionaries. Yet, as at the time of Marco Polo, the curiosity for a new world was intertwined with the transfer of old Ro-

man Catholic beliefs. The popularization of Christianity in China represented this transmission of beliefs, ideas, and objects and involved all the strata of Chinese society in different ways.

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