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The Globalization of Catholicism as Expressed in the Sacramental Narratives of Jiangnan Catholics from the Late Ming to Early Republican Period

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Abstract: From the Late Ming to the Republican period, Chinese Catholics living in Jiangnan (present-day Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Anhui) progressively appropriated the sacramental doctrine and practices of the Church. This study examines the implementation and evolution of the sacraments of baptism, marriage, and extreme unction, and it focuses on each of them at a different moment in the process of acculturation. The latter can be analyzed in terms of both localization and globalization: on the one hand, the religiosity displayed by the grassroots communities integrated elements proper to Chinese tradition and sensitivity. On the other hand, local believers developed a consciousness of their participation in the global Church through active sacramental practice. Sacramental acculturation and identity building were mediated by a “ritual rhetoric” that provided communities with *topoi* through which to endow their existence with accrued meaning and blessings.

Keywords: baptism; Chinese Catholics; extreme unction; grace; Jiangnan region; marriage (sacrament of); Rites Controversy; ritual rhetoric; sacraments



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1. Introduction

Catholicism first developed in the Jiangnan region¹ under the impetus and protection of the intellectual and statesman Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633) and, later on, of his granddaughter Candida Xu 徐甘第大 (1607–1680), of whose personality and agency the Jesuit Philippe Couplet (1623–1685) has left a striking description (Couplet 1688). The new religion soon spread in several areas of a region that an extended network of rivers and canals makes a hub of transportation. Local communities survived the period during which Christianity had become a prohibited religion, and they greeted a new generation of missionaries after 1842. The initial period of this new encounter was marred with tensions between these communities and missionary tutelage (De La Servière 1915; Tiedemann 2008). Still, around 1950, Shanghai and its surroundings constituted one of the most flourishing Catholic territories in China, with laypeople and local clergy actively involved in its development (Mariani 2011, pp. 7–26).

In this article, I examine the process of consolidation and evolution of the Jiangnan-based Catholic local communities from the late Ming to the early Republican period, and I do so by looking at their sacramental practices. This entails focusing on narrative documents such as personal diaries, notes, and letters by missionaries or believers, examining them not from the viewpoint of their factual objectivity but rather from that of the experiences they convey. They must be read as a “retrospective narrative” (Yamane 2000), the rhetoric of which is part of its historical value. By doing so, I intend to highlight a twofold historical process: (a) the progressive localization of the Church’s universal prescriptions; (b) the globalization process of Catholicism in the period under consideration from the viewpoint of Catholic development within one specific regional context.

I will proceed in four stages. The first one defines what a focus on sacraments may bring to the understanding of local Catholic communities, while inserting such focus into

the research that bears on “religiosity” and contextualizing this line of inquiry. I continue by studying three sacramental rituals, with a frame of reference centered on the Late Ming period for baptism, the timespan from 1842 to the beginning of the 20th century for marriage, and the first decades of the same century for extreme unction. This will allow us to examine both the specificities attached to each of these sacraments and the global evolution of sacramental religiosity over the whole of the period. My conclusion will assess what this research has led us to understand about the ethos and faith experience of successive generations of Jiangnan Catholics.

2. Sacramental Religiosity: Concept, Method, and Setting

2.1. Sacraments in Time and Space

For Catholics, “sacraments” are the visible signs of the grace that God bestows on believers’ souls. Accordingly, studies on sacraments have traditionally focused on their theological connotations (Rahner 1963; Jenson 1997; Holcomb and Johnson 2017). However, anthropological and sociological studies on rituals, symbols, and religious organizations have progressively opened up new venues of understanding, focused on the context of their reception as well as on their meaning for the faithful and the impact it has on their existence. For example, Terence Cuneo analyzes the prayer texts and ritual processes used when administering the Orthodox baptism, pointing out that the person being baptized achieves in its course a twofold transformation (Cuneo 2014). Marion’s phenomenological perspective (Marion 2002) has inspired Woody’s research on the Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Woody does not focus on the specific ritual process; he rather attempts to interpret baptism as a “profound experience” for new Christians (Woody 2021). These research paths differ significantly one from another, and they are anchored into different disciplines. However, it is precisely these constantly emerging differences that expand our understanding of the sacraments and what they achieve.

In addition, sacraments are anchored into specific times and contexts, and the taking into account of the latter is part of the interpretative process. For example, sacraments became a locus of exploration for scholars studying the social and intellectual changes in European society, as the Reformation sought to break free from the constraints imposed by the Catholic Church (Peters 2000; Cristellon 2017). The limits of a purely historical focus, which treats sacraments as indexes of the contradictions brewing in society, may include that it pays little attention to the impact of the sacraments themselves on the people who receive them. However, the significance of documentary narratives is greatly expanded when re-read through a convincing interpretative frame. Henrietta Harrison’s research is a case in point: studying both history and memory of Shaanxi Catholic rural communities, she uses local material, especially oral narratives, in order to highlight what the stories being told reveal of the experience and worldview of their narrators, thus going beyond the mere examination of the “truth” or “falsehood” value to be attributed to these local narratives (Harrison 2013). Concurrently, Harrison integrates the same narratives into the global background that has led to their emergence. Harrison’s research also reminds us that the process through which sacraments are enacted and interpreted in local Catholic communities is of a similar level of complexity in various settings—Western Europe, the Andes, Goa, or even Shaanxi province. It is worth noting that Chinese scholars have paid special attention to (Thomist-inspired) Catholic sacramental theology as developing a specific cultural and anthropological perspective (Bai 2017). This attention may be due to perceived correspondences between the Catholic stress on liturgy and sacraments, on the one hand, and the Chinese focus on ritual (*li* 禮), traditionally seen as encompassing educational, moral, social, and religious dimensions, on the other hand.

2.2. Studying Religiosity in Jiangnan

Our focus on lived experience and meaning explains our use of the term “religiosity”: the use of this term avoids “[the trap of a] distinction between inner (individual) faith and collective religious institutions” (Yang 2008, p. 18). In other words, it makes the commu-

nity under study the subject of both its representations and devotional practices. Needless to say, this collective subject develops both representations and practices within a web of relationships with other subjects—clergy, state representatives, society at large, and other faith communities.

Religiosity finds its expression through a “ritual rhetoric.” As Podemann Sørensen (2003) does, I understand by “ritual rhetoric” a set of motives (*topoi*)—or master plots—that organize both the practice of rituals and the narratives that coalesce around them. These motives are legitimized by communal acceptance; they pattern the forms taken by the ritual, linking together stories and practices; moreover, they contribute to the *social* efficacy of the ritual (generally reinforcing communal cohesion) while also defining its *sacred* efficacy. I will highlight the diversity of ritual purposes and forms that this approach enables us to cover and interpret. Additionally, by studying believing communities in their formative period, we will be able to analyze some of these rhetorical motives in *statunascendi*, until the time they crystallize.

I am looking for expressions of Jiangnan Catholics’ religiosity through the reading of narratives related to specific sacramental rituals, supplemented by reference to doctrinal literature (including sacramental rules) compiled by the Church for the communities under study. Among the latter are *Tianzhu shengjiao baiwenda* 天主聖教百問答 (*One hundred questions on [the doctrine of] the Holy Catholic Church*) (1675) by the Jesuit Philippe Couplet (1624–1692); Ludovico Buglio S.J. (1606–1682)’s translation of *Manuale ad Sacramēta ministranda iuxta ritū* as *Shengshi lidian* 聖事禮典 (*Rituals for Administering the Sacraments*) (Buglio [1675] 2002); and Joannes Twrdy S.J. (1846–1910)’s three-volume *Jiaoli xiangjie* 教理詳解 (*Detailed explanations on the Doctrine of the Church*), published in 1887 and already reprinted for the third time in 1907 (see Twrdy [1887] 1907). (See a Chinese-language analysis of these materials for the Late Ming and Early Qing period in Huiling Yang 2021). The texts provided by the Church were authoritatively clarifying ritual performances, giving them theological significance, and establishing the basic norms that local believers should follow. Sacramental rules can be seen as the formal framework of the ritual, and researchers put this framework in relation with the specific content of a ritual occurrence, such as the words, behaviors, and feelings of the participating believers, as well as with the spatial atmosphere of the ritual. This set of data is scattered in narrative documents such as missionary letters, notes, or believers’ genealogies.

I thus take catechetical/doctrinal literature as a basis for understanding rituals and narrative literature related to sacramental occurrences as the focus of research and analysis. The interaction between the two sets of documents unveils the presence of a flexible space between rules and practices. This space allows for the coordination of sacramental rituals, on the one hand, and local customs and concepts, on the other hand. Both missionaries and local believers were endeavoring to create space for conciliation and coordination, though they were doing so with different concerns and sensitivities.

2.3. Sacramental Practices in Catholic China: Beyond the Rites Controversy

While the research around the “Rites Controversy” has accumulated fruitful results (Mungello 1994; Županov and Fabre 2018; Han 2021), it has generated such interest among historians that it may obscure all issues related to Christian rituals in Chinese context by interpreting them under this umbrella. Studies around the “Chinese Rites Controversy” generally focus on the collision between Chinese and Western cultures, while this article is interested in the history and development of Chinese Catholicism in its own terms. I will mention differences and contradictions between sacramental rituals and local customs and beliefs, but I will mainly explore how local Catholics in the Jiangnan region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties continued their faith practices in the midst of the aforesaid conflicts and differences. Their specific practices organically constituted Chinese Catholicism in the form it has taken.

While not being the object of this study, the “Rites Controversy” constitutes an indispensable backdrop for constructing our historical context. As a historical event, it pro-

foundly affected the development of Catholicism in China, leading the Yongzheng 雍正 Emperor to revoke in 1724 the Kangxi 康熙 emperor's edict of Christian toleration issued in 1692. Further restrictive measures would soon follow. However, the policy initiated by Yongzheng did not lead to the actual disappearance of Catholicism. Historical documents describe missionaries venturing to various places in the Jiangnan region and believers inviting missionaries to visit communities (*huikou* 會口)² and perform sacramental services (Xu 1932). For example, before being arrested and executed in Suzhou 苏州, António-José Henriques S.J. (1707–1747) and Tristano Attimis S.J. (–1747) had traveled around Suzhou and Songjiang 松江 in such a way as “to avoid the non-believers, hiding during the day and walking at night, and staying at the homes of believers. When it was late at night and quiet, they gathered their flock to perform the sacraments, and dispersed at dawn.” (Xu 1932, p. 20)

Historians often see the kind of local resilience exemplified by the micro-story quoted above as a mere manifestation of personal faith and thus fail to account for the stress that agents place on the “grace” attached to the reception of the sacraments. This may be because they see terms such as “grace,” as formulaic expressions. However, Catholic believers tend to see themselves as being prepared to enter supernatural life only if they regularly receive the sacraments and obtain divine grace through the liturgy through which sacraments are offered. Each of the seven sacraments has a specific significance, and they are linked to different life situations. Baptism, marriage, and anointing of the sick (or “last rites”) are directly related to the three basic experiences of a believer's life: birth, marriage, and death. Beyond their understanding as “rites of passage”, as Arnold vanGennep famously put it, they receive specific meaning: baptism erases the original sin and forgives all the trespasses committed by the newly baptized person, thus reborn as a child of God; the sacrament of marriage ensures the legitimacy of the new family and blesses the offspring to come; as to the anointing of the sick, it can forgive all sins of the dying person and alleviate her pains. Therefore, even in situations where missionary work and worship activities were drastically restricted, missionaries and local believers in the Jiangnan region would try their best to enact and receive these three sacraments, and they would record such occurrences.³

3. Baptism: Reconciling Confucianism and Christianity

In the time span covered by this study (from the end of the Ming Dynasty to the early Republic of China era), the Jiangnan region underwent the same social and political experiences as the rest of China, i.e., a dynastic change, the rise of the Qing Empire, and then its gradual collapse under external pressures. From a broader perspective, international flows and connections, as well as the formation of a world pattern centered on Europe, gradually integrated the Jiangnan region into the globalization process. This coincided with the time when Catholicism began its own journey towards becoming truly globalized. This journey inevitably retroacted upon the development of Catholicism in Jiangnan. The devotional practices of local believers would eventually become part of a globally organized Catholicism.

3.1. The Initiation Ceremony of Catechumenate for Literati

In 1620, a candidate to a government position in Shaanxi province had succeeded in the examination and was waiting for his official appointment in his native city of Yangzhou 扬州, in Jiangnan. He intended to convert to Catholicism. Before baptism, he needed to learn doctrinal and practical precepts. This process of apprenticeship—the catechumenate—has received a rather elegant Chinese designation, *mudao* 慕道.⁴

Progressively, after the promulgation of the Edict of Milan, most Europeans were baptized shortly after birth and were growing up in Christian families. The catechumenate that was designed by the early Church for helping converts to overcome the influence of their pagan environment was no longer necessary. However, for converts of the late Ming Dynasty who “[had] been obscured in pagan darkness for some thousands of years,

without ever, or scarcely ever, beholding a ray of the light of Christianity" (Ricci 1953, p. 82.), it was particularly necessary to undertake the catechumenate before baptism.

Giulio Aleni S.J. (1582–1649) arranged for our candidate to publicly become a catechumen through an ad hoc ceremony, which would be referred to as the "catechumenate initiation ceremony." On that day, this candidate for the *daotai* 道台 (province official) position wore the official uniform that indicated his upcoming promotion to government office, knelt and paid respect in front of the altar, and then accepted the doctrinal books placed on the altar (Colombel 2009, vol. I, p. 181⁵).

Auguste M. Colombel S.J. (1833–1905) describes the process in just one sentence, which evokes a Confucian scholar entering apprenticeship. Was this ceremony alien to the ritual of the Catholic Church? What we now call the "catechumenate" was divided into two stages: the one of inquiring, and the catechumenate proper. In the inquiring stage, the persons asking to enter the Church needed to understand its basic teachings and regulations, so as to establish the foundations of the faith, and to show their determination to live according to Christian precepts. Afterwards, they were considered as catechumens, candidates for baptism, giving up all pagan habits and learning to become Christians (Edelby 2021). At this point, catechumens could participate in the Liturgy of the Word and were regarded as "almost Christians": their identity had already changed. Therefore, the Church had set up a symbolic ceremony to enter into the stage of the catechumenate. In the *De catechizandis rudibus* (*On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*), St. Augustine had written: "The person is to be asked whether he believes these things and earnestly desires to observe them. And on his replying to that effect then certainly he is to be solemnly signed and dealt with in accordance with the custom of the Church." (Augustine n.d., chp. 26)

The missionaries in the late Ming Dynasty did set requirements for aspiring believers in Jiangnan, but they did not follow the early practices of the Church. The ceremony they arranged borrowed from the tradition of Confucian ritual. In the eyes of literati nurtured by Confucianism, when a scholar dressed in formal attire kneels and bows before the altar where the sacred books are placed, the ritual not only conforms to the etiquette of Confucian disciples paying respect to their teachers but also reflects their yearning for the true path. At the same time, this altar is dedicated to "God [*Tianzhu* 天主]", and these books contain the basic doctrines of Catholicism, so the seeker's pursuit of the "true path" is nothing else than Catholicism.

Though the initiation ceremony for Jiangnan scholars differs from the one of the Early Church in Europe, the purpose and significance of the two ceremonies are identical. As stipulated by Augustine, the petitioner must show to the Christian community that he/she believes in God and is willing to abide by the doctrine. Performing the ceremony also means that he/she has been accepted by the community and should begin to live in the way Christians are asked to do.

The initiation ceremony performed in Yangzhou was specifically designed for literati and was not applicable to the common people: the latter could not wear official robes during the ceremony. In the documents recording the baptism of local Catholics in Jiangnan, there is almost no trace of similar ceremonies after the ban on Christianity was issued. Of course, this does not mean that the process of the catechumenate was abolished. Many descriptions of local conversion reflect the fact that those who intended to convert had to renounce all heresies, including all objects and customs related to idolatry, before being accepted as "people keeping the doctrine" (*baoshouzh* 保守者) by local Catholic communities and missionaries⁶. "[The postulant] visits the instructor or teacher in person and asks him to write his name in the register. Once the teacher accepts the request, it is anticipated that the postulant will be baptized." (Vagne n.d., p. 5)⁷

The uniqueness of the initiation ceremony for Confucian literati was due to the adherence to the principles set up by Matteo Ricci: abiding by Chinese laws, understanding the social structure and local customs of China, and realizing that the support of the social elite class for missionary work required the missionaries to observe Confucian etiquette. Therefore, scholars and ordinary people were treated differently. Scholars were allowed

to display the marks of their identity while affirming their wholehearted devotion to God and their willingness to learn how to become a Christian.

3.2. *The Declaration of Faith*

During the late Ming Dynasty, such a strategy led missionaries in Jiangnan to show flexibility in carrying out the baptismal ceremony. The most famous example was the baptism on 16 March 1605, at the Jesuit church in Nanjing, of Qu Taisu 瞿太素⁸, who came from a family of officials. The entire baptismal ceremony was based on the rules set up by the Church, with two addenda: “he prostrated himself and struck the floor with his forehead four times”, and then reading a “Declaration of Faith” written by the newly baptized before the pouring of water. (Ricci 1953, pp. 467–71)

Kneeling and bowing devoutly is a traditional Chinese etiquette rule, expressing supplication and/or gratitude towards a superior. Qu Taisu performed this gesture in order to pray that God may forgive his past sins and evils. The recitation of the “Declaration of Faith” was an even more explicit expression of his intent. The main contents included his personal experience of converting to Catholicism, his resolution to break with the past, his firm belief in God, and his acceptance of doctrine as truth. Although this can be read as a mere confirmation that the requirements of the Church had been met, the agency of Qu Taisu should not be overlooked. Rather paradoxically, agency is first shown by the fact that this literati from a prominent family read a text written in a specialized idiom, which he needed to appropriate. Such public appropriation is a rhetorical statement *per se*. Second, Qu explicitly referred to his former faith in Buddhism. This, he said, had been idol worship, a “heinous sin.” Now believing that only God can forgive sinners, he was emphasizing his personal acceptance of faith: “... the holy sacrament of baptism which cleanses the soul of every stain, I shall wholly eradicate from my mind every vestige of belief in false gods, and in the unreasonable doctrine that centers about them.” (Ricci 1953, p. 470) Qu Taisu clearly stated what his past “sins” were and that in which he now was believing. Although he did not mention “original sin”, he expressed his understanding of the unfamiliar ritual of baptism in his own language. Then he continued, “As for the various doctrines and teachings of the Catholicism, although I cannot understand their great and lofty mysteries, I humbly obey what they teach, and I pray that the Holy Spirit of God may enlighten me and help me understand their true essence.” (Gu 1989, p. 15) The rhetoric of this statement is characteristic of Catholicism, not only because of its vocabulary, but also because of its logical expression: the neophyte must maintain a humble heart and fully rely on God in order to understand in a deeper fashion the truths in which he already believes. The rhetoric of Qu Taisu’s declaration reflects his new faith consciousness as well as his personal agency, the two combined leading him to declare already believing in truths he still needs to appropriate.

4. The Sacrament of Matrimony and Traditional Family Values

4.1. *Implementing the Sacramental Ritual of Marriage*

In 1900, Joseph Dannic (1867–1923), a Jesuit missionary who preached in Maojia (Maojia) 毛家 village, in Anhui 安徽 province, recorded the six marriage ceremonies he had performed in the past four years. He had hoped to recreate solemn and joyous Breton-style wedding ceremonies here. Considering that Chinese customs often use the color red in celebrations, he had allowed Catholic newlyweds to wear red wedding attire and encouraged believers to decorate the church with red instead of the white or blue typical of Western weddings. However, it was still very difficult to hold a “real” Sacrament of Matrimony, which the priest found disappointing. According to Joseph Dannic, the bride was always ashamed to show her face in front of everyone, the groom refused to answer the priest when the latter asked whether he was willing to accept the bride, or both parties were unwilling to even enter the church publicly. The priest could only wait patiently in front of the altar, or limit the number of spectators in the church and simplify the ceremony. Otherwise, he would fall into the embarrassment of refusing to perform the marriage and

then seeing the people “praise [the couple] (for refusing to marry) and curse us.” In his view, only one of the six weddings held for local believers was in accordance with the sacramental stipulations of the Church (Dannic 1900).

The difficulty of performing a Catholic wedding ceremony was not limited to extremely traditional places like Mao-kia village. Even in Shanghai, which had already opened its doors to foreign influence, priests often needed to urge believers to hold matrimony in the church. In contrast with baptism, which had no corresponding custom in traditional Chinese rites, the regulations governing marriage in China were established since antiquity, and they had developed into an important component of social and ethical order. Wedding was regarded as one of the most important social ceremonies. Regardless of the individual's social status, there were etiquette customs to be followed. The full implementation of the Catholic sacrament of matrimony among local believers in Jiangnan during the late Ming and late Qing dynasties was certainly not an overnight process.

For Catholics, the prerequisite for receiving the sacrament of matrimony lies in their commitment to follow the Catholic rules of marriage. In China, the most basic of them were spelt out as follows: one man and one woman, established as legitimate husband and wife; lifelong commitment without separation; no concubines; and prohibition on marrying non-Catholics (Huang 1936, p. 62).⁹ These were the rules most emphasized among Catholic believers in Jiangnan, and it restricted the baptism of people who intended to convert but kept concubines (this led Qu Taisu to delay his baptism). In addition, due to the constraints attached to gender roles, Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties decided to temporarily suspend matrimony ceremonies, so to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, while asking local believers to follow local precepts related to marriage: “Till now, we have been unable to secure the observance of the rules established by the holy Council of Trent as to matrimony, neither to ensure the presence of a priest et of two witnesses, nor to make the couple hold hands as a testimony of faith and mutual consent.” (Couplet 1688, p. 15) Consequently, the Chinese *Shengshi lidian* 聖事裡典 compiled by the Church in 1675 contented itself with explaining the sacredness and regulations of Catholic marriage, and it omitted all content related to the marriage ceremony, stating “it is not convenient to perform the marriage ceremony now, so let it be.” (Buglio [1675] 2002, p. 52)

This situation continued until Lodovico Maria Bési (1805–1871), also known as Luo Lei 羅類思, became the Bishop of the Nanjing Diocese. Although the missionary work in Jiangnan had just resumed and the ban on Christianity had not yet been lifted, Mgr. Bési issued a special decree to the entire diocese, requiring that believers' weddings be held in accordance with the Catholic Order of Celebrating Matrimony (Bési [1845] 1996). Thus, believers had to follow rituals that they were once able to avoid during marriage celebrations, even if were worried that they would violate customs and attract social scrutiny. The most difficult, for both men and women, was to kneel together in front of the altar, and to express verbally in front of the priest and of witnesses, their willingness to marry. In China, marriage is traditionally arranged by “parental command and matchmaker's words (*fumu zhi ming, meishuo zhi yan* 父母之命，媒妁之言)”. Personal preference is often regarded as a private matter, which etiquette and customs forbid expressing in public. Therefore, Mgr. Bési granted some leniency, allowing the couple to hold hands and to make the sign of the cross, so as to express their willingness through body language and not explicit wording. If the two would not perform this gesture, it was to be inferred that they had no intention to remain husband and wife, and they could not receive this sacramental grace. Moreover, Mgr. Bési emphasized that there could be no wedding banquet without the sacrament of marriage having been celebrated first.

4.2. From Matrimony to Family

Although the bishop demanded strict adherence to the liturgical dispositions he had prescribed, their implementation among believers in Jiangnan was slow, and many believers still refused to follow certain rituals even decades later, especially when it came

to expressing personal will during the marriage ceremony. This does not mean that local believers did not value the sacrament: “forming a family” through marriage was of the utmost importance for the vast majority of local believers. An unmarried man could obtain fame in the imperial examinations, bringing glory to his family and gaining social respect, but still, if yet unmarried, he had not the status of an “adult”. For a woman, marriage not only brought her into another family space but also granted her a clear social identity. Therefore, as a transitional life rite, a wedding meant not only that individuals were granted a new social status but also that a new family had taken shape. Catholic weddings needed to take into account both local customs and Church precepts. In other words, believers were hoping that the new families formed by the celebration of weddings would obtain not only social recognition but also the blessing of the Church.

When celebrating a wedding, the priest was well aware of the core position of “family (*jia* 家)” for Chinese Catholics and gave blessings that responded to such centrality. One of them reads as follows: “The Church blesses the newlyweds to live to see their descendants thrive for three or four generations, and to receive eternal life after death. The blessing of the Church [consists in] asking from God that it may be so.” (Shen 1917, p. 14) Such blessings sounded beautiful even in the ear of non-believers. Local believers were interpreting the good fortune bestowed upon their family as a result of divine blessing, the latter due to the fact that they were respecting Catholic rules on matrimony. The Shen family of Zhuxi-anhui 諸巷會 in Qingpu 青浦 county linked the prosperity of their family’s offspring with adhering to the monogamous marriage system as Catholics:

Among the fifteen families of the Shen clan, nine have more than ten children born to one parent . . . the remaining six families have children born to different mothers. However, the heads of these families were all followers of the Catholic faith, practicing monogamy and rejecting concubinage and polygamy. All of their children are legitimate and none are illegitimate. Compared to many non-Catholic families, isn’t this quite remarkable? This is also a great testimony to the blessings that God bestowed on our believers’ community. (Shen 1917, p. 14)

This short account is meant to prove that monogamy will not lead to the rarefaction of offspring and family extinction, and that faith makes family flourish much more than sticking to concubinage does. Future generations need to be aware of this fact, and this is why the account recalls it.

The last stage of the implementation of the marriage liturgy among believers in Jiangnan is related to the 1911 Revolution, the “New Culture” movement, and the promotion of “Transforming outmoded customs and habits (*yi feng yisu* 移風易俗)” by the government of the Republic of China. In society as a whole, the concept of marriage began to change. Traditional Chinese weddings had gradually become regarded as outdated and vulgar, while Western-style weddings had become the fashion of the times. Thus, the Church rules as to the marriage liturgy started to be socially recognized and even praised. Still, the view of marriage implied in the ceremony now seen as “leading-edge” was not deviating completely from tradition. Fr. Xu Zongze 徐宗澤 S.J. (1886–1947), a leading intellectual deeply influenced by Western learning, criticized in his writings the concept that marriage was based entirely on freedom and individual will, seeing such a trend as an important factor in shaking the stability of the family (Xu 1926, pp. 19–20). This was not a personal opinion: as the chief editor of the *Revue Catholique* (*Shengjiao zazhi* 聖教雜誌) he was both representing and leading mainstream Catholic thinking in Shanghai and surrounding areas at that time.

In 1896, Auguste Pierre S.J. (1856–1910), a priest at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Zhangjialou 張家樓,¹⁰ wrote an article to the American newspaper *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* and attached a family photo of the leader of a believers’ community (local community leaders were known as *huizhang* 會長, or *guantang xianshen* 管堂先生) of this church. (Figure 1) It was taken in the hall of his newly built house. Although the picture is a bit blurry, it can still be seen that the owner arranged the house according to the manner of a small chapel in a private house; clothing also indicates that this is a well-off traditional Chinese family. The head of the household and wife sit directly in the middle,

and the male and female families are on separate sides. A few young children either stand or sit in the front row, and the two babies are held in the arms of the young man. The article indicates that a boy and girl were missing from the family photo. They were studying at a boarding school run by the Xujiahui Jesuit Order. The priest is very satisfied with the local Catholic family and hopes that “the family will continue to revere the Sacred Heart of Jesus from generation to generation.” (Pierre 1896, p. 337).



Figure 1. A lay Catholic leader and his family, 1896. Sourced from Pierre (1896, p. 337).

5. The Last Anointing: Preparing for the End of Life

5.1. Receiving Extreme Unction

Let us start with the homage that a Jesuit parish priest gave to the recently deceased leader of a local community:

On Saturday, December 16th, the administrator of the believers' community belonging to the church of Jesus Sacred Heart in Zhangjialou near the city of Shanghai, the most senior and respected among our many administrators, passed away quietly. I have mentioned what kind of administrator he was many times before, so there is no need to repeat it. As long as he did his job well, everything would go smoothly, otherwise there would be a crisis. André Tsang-ming-king, was a good person.

In early December, Tsang suddenly fell ill while managing his rice business in Shanghai. His attendants were very calm and, considering his age, decided to quickly send him back to his home, located in front of the church, where he could receive the Eucharist more conveniently and frequently. Soon, his condition worsened and Father Rodolf Beaugendre¹¹ of the Church performed the Extreme Unction on him.

On Friday, December 15th, I went to administer the Holy Eucharist for the fourth time. He was conscious and his confession was very moving. He looked well, but said to me, “Father, it’s time to end it. I will die tomorrow, which is Saturday. I often recite the Little Office to obtain this grace! Before I leave, I want to talk to the children.” Everyone was surprised: “Father, this is too shocking. He said he will die tomorrow!”

The old man summoned his family and asked them to forgive him for his past mistakes. Everyone knelt down and said he had done nothing wrong. As their father and head of the family, he spoke these words. They all unanimously asked for his blessing. He lifted up the cross on his body and said, “In the name of the

Lord Jesus, I bless you all.” He added a few words: “Believe me, relying on God wholeheartedly will bring great happiness.” ...

Late at night, the whole family was with him. Around one o’clock, he asked, “Is it Saturday?” This was his last words. There was no wailing, no trembling, he returned his soul to God. (Baumert 1912, pp. 449–50)

This short article published in the Jesuit periodical *Relations de Chine* does not focus on the life of André Tsang. Instead, it describes several fragments of his final moments.

The first fragment narrates how he was taken home after falling ill, how he soon received extreme unction due to his worsening condition. The implicit message is that he did not stay in Shanghai to seek medical treatment but chose to go home because his home was close to the church, so he could receive more often the Eucharist. Between “asking for medicine” and “dying saintly”, André Tsang chose the latter. He anticipated the near end of his life. This choice seemed logical to Catholics at the time but might not have been so sixty years before this story.

The core purpose of the sacrament then known as extreme unction¹² is to give spiritual comfort to Christians who are seriously ill. In a document of the Qing period that gives a Chinese summary of the Catholic doctrine and was reprinted by local churches, anointing was said “to strengthen the weakness of the soul of the severely ill, forgive their sins, increase their spiritual strength ... so as to repel the temptation of the devil when one is seriously ill, ... to strengthen the weakness of the flesh, or to make it recover from illness, or to make it endure the suffering of this life, in order to make up for the sins of life, and to avoid the heavy punishment of the sins after death.” (Ortiz [1705] 1842, pp. 97–98)

Compared to the Confucian emphasis on funeral rites and customs, aiming at strengthening the body of the dying and providing comfort and salvation for their soul were originally objectives unfamiliar to Chinese Catholics who had grown up in a traditional cultural context. In the process of becoming accustomed to this sacrament, this unfamiliarity led to misunderstandings and divergence among believers.

On the one hand, some believers regarded the anointing as a ritual for the dead and were unwilling to ask the priest to perform the ritual, as they were afraid that the anointing would hasten death. The sacrament was not asked for until the patient had lost consciousness, unable to confess and receive the Holy Eucharist, which, in the eye of the Church, was impeding the grace that should have been given to the patient. Therefore, the priest would request family or friends to urge the patient to make a confession and receive the Eucharist as soon as possible. “Any male or female parishioners who know that a good or bad person is seriously ill should do so, lest it is difficult to confess when they are unconscious.” (Twrdy [1887] 1907, vol. III, p. 112) Furthermore, in the course of this sacramental ritual, the priest also explained the effects of the sacrament to the patient, saying, “there are people who, having received the Eucharist in the inner and been anointed on the outer, have recovered” (Buglio [1675] 2002, p. 468). Still, there was no shortage of cases where patients entered a critical stage after receiving the sacrament. As a result, the liturgical book added: “If the sick person recovers, but later falls seriously ill again, he/she may receive the sacrament of extreme unction again.” (Buglio [1675] 2002, p. 468). This license is confirmed in latter-day documents: “If the danger of death is first gone but the patient has another attack later on and is going to die, s/he can receive the sacrament again.” (Twrdy [1887] 1907, vol. III, p. 112)

On the opposite side, some believers were focusing on the healing aspect of extreme unction, connecting the power of the holy oil with physical well-being, thus believing that many patients were recovering quickly after receiving the anointing. Because the Church was not limiting the number of times one could receive extreme unction, priests in Jiangnan were busy with its administration. One of the first Jesuits to return to Jiangnan, Fr. François Estève S.J. (1807–1848), mentions in a letter written from Pudong 浦東 in 1843 that local believers who were ill could travel 12, 24 or 48 miles by waterway to receive the sacrament, regardless of the severity of the illness or of the season: “Do not think that these difficulties will scare our brave believers. As soon as they get sick, before even thinking of

seeing a doctor, they try to find a missionary.” (Estève 1847 [written in 1843]) It was not uncommon for parishioners to come to the priest when there was a rare disease in their immediate neighborhood. As attested by J. De La Servière S.J. (1866–1937), there were even cases where people pretended to be seriously ill in order to have a priest come to their home to administer the sacraments. (De La Servière 1915, p. 126) It was for this reason that the Church authorities admonished, “do not be distracted by praying for the body, to be strengthened, but rather for the soul.” (Buglio [1675] 2002, p. 53) A priest also advised the faithful that “not all parishioners who had received the Unction would recover, and death cannot be avoided.” (Luo 1935, p. 253)

The process of accommodation would gradually change both the priests’ and the faithful’s outlook on the sacrament. In the early 20th century, most priests in Jiangnan believed that extreme unction should not be administered only when the patient was dying: “First, at the moment of death, one’s mind may be confused and it may be difficult to make proper preparations . . . Second, our Lord Jesus established this sacrament of the anointing of the sick for the benefit of the patient’s body. If it is only received at the moment of death, unless God works a miracle, it often cannot be restored. Therefore, it is better to receive it early, in the hope of recovery.” (Twrdy [1887] 1907, vol. III, p. 112)

5.2. *Preparing for Death*

In an environment where the sacrament of unction had become part of local identity and practices, André Tsang made a choice that was in line with his faith. Before his passing, he received communion for the fourth time and confessed again beforehand. Even though he was bedridden, he recited the Little Office every day, trying his best to continue to follow the rules of the Church. The narrative stresses his request for forgiveness from his own family as well as the blessing and admonition he extends upon it. Then, death came as expected—the accomplishment of a meritorious life.

This passage indicates that preparing for death was not just about receiving the last anointing. In the case of André Tsang, extreme unction rather seems to inaugurate his preparation for death. Even after the ritual is completed, he continues to strive so as to be found in the appropriate state: reciting scriptures, confessing and receiving the Eucharist repeatedly, praying for God’s forgiveness and understanding from loved ones, and seeking redemption and comfort for his soul, until the last moment arrives. This attitude differs from traditional Chinese etiquette, which emphasizes arranging one’s state of affairs after death has occurred, notably funeral dispositions.

The narrator–priest rhetorically emphasizes the calmness of the old man in the face of death, and this until the last moment, the absence of struggle and fear. It is not explicitly ascertained whether such tranquility comes from physical weakness or from the peace bestowed to the soul by the last anointing, though inferences are easily made by the reader. What is more, the peaceful atmosphere that the reception of the last rites seems to have created has permeated the entire family. This atmosphere contrasts sharply with the mourning tradition typical of Chinese folk religion. The narrative offers both a model of the attitude expected from a faithful person when facing death and a contrast to the way death is envisioned and managed in Chinese society at large.

One last point requires attention: the readers of the periodical are living overseas, but the story of a Chinese lay Catholic presents them with an exemplary model of sacramental devotion. Through the latter, the local communities of Jiangnan have established their setting in the universal Church.

6. Conclusions

I have associated three specific historical moments with the history of the reception of three distinct sacraments and also with the treatment of materials that differ in nature and style. This combination allows us to draw four concluding theses.

Through a process that was at times convoluted, local Catholics in Jiangnan gradually conformed to Church regulations concerning sacraments and liturgy. In the late Ming Dy-

nasty, missionaries were interpreting sacramental discipline in a way that could conciliate Christianity with the Confucian ethos, even bending the rules governing the sacrament of marriage so as to avoid violating Chinese etiquette and ritual. Around the time when the Qing Dynasty entered a period of crises, compliance with these same rules were required from all levels of society. Over time, local Catholics had not only become familiar with the sacramental rules and regulations but also seem to have internalized them. While the impact of the edicts prohibiting Christianity during the first half of the Qing dynasty cannot be overlooked, overall, sacramental practice in the Jiangnan region became increasingly “Romanized”. Without doubt, the Church’s reliance on the Western powers was a crucial factor in the process. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church had been strengthening the universal character of its liturgical rules since the time of Reformation. The emphasis on the consistency of sacramental rituals was meant for the entire Church, not for China or any region in particular.

Regardless of the preceding considerations, there always remained a flexible space for local sacramental practices. Such a space continued to accommodate sacramental rituals and local customs at different historical moments. We have seen examples of the initiation ceremony of the catechumenate and declaration of faith for Confucians in the late Ming dynasty or even in the use of body language (rather than verbal consent) in the wedding ceremonies of the late Qing period. The rhetoric of ritual is what allows for the formation of an elastic space where the meaning of sacraments and ceremonies can be internalized by local agents.

Through the ritual rhetoric they allow participants to develop, baptism, the sacrament of marriage, and last anointing integrate Catholic doctrine on life, marriage, and death into an individual’s understanding of human and divine existence. Such ritual rhetoric is reflected in the different narratives speaking to sacramental practices. Some texts are written by local believers, mixing traditional rhetorical tropes with Catholic characteristics. The contemporary Catholic Chinese lexicon partly originates from the texts written by these local believers. This is the case with the expression “various doctrines and teachings (*geduan xindao* 各端信道)” or “{the} Holy Spirit of God (*tianzhu shengshen* 天主圣神)”. A more detailed analysis of these texts would also reveal how the Catholic concept of “grace” was progressively constructed, helping local believers to appropriate universal concepts in their own language. Other texts originate from missionaries. Besides offering interesting factual records, the latter present us with typical expectations as to what local believers were meant to become—Christians conforming to the universal model offered by the Church.

In fact, from the Late Ming to the Republican period, Jesuit missionaries continuously emphasized that sacramental rituals are identical in their form and purpose everywhere in the world. Because the doctrine is universally applicable, it lays the seeds for intercommunication among believers beyond geographical boundaries, progressively shaping the global consciousness of local Catholics, even when this dimension of consciousness does not explicitly appear. The influential intellectual and educator Ma Xiangbo 馬相伯 (1840–1939) has expressed this in a style that made his statement strongly resonate in the ears of the faithful to whom he was speaking:

A Catholic has in his mind a concept of the Global (*quanqiu* 全球), as the altar where ten million sacrifices [take place]. [It goes] from the altar consecrated by the Pope to the altars that can be moved by the missionaries to the farthest corners of the Earth. And in the altars set up in the forests of Africa, it is still the highest and greatest sacrifice, [receiving] always the same reverence. Every hour, every minute, twenty-four hours a day, there is a great Mass celebrated on Earth. Whether it is the Pope who officiates or others, whether the sacrifice is offered in a large city, in a large Church, in all its glory and splendor, or in the chapel of a small congregation, in the chapel of a small monastery, or in a vessel at sea, or in the open air, or in the woods, in wilderness, or in a desert where no one comes, sacramentally speaking, the Eucharist is exactly the same. (Ma 1926, p. 459)

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Notes

- ¹ Jiangnan 江南 (formerly romanized Kiang-nan) region is a geographical term endowed with rich cultural connotations. The specific area it refers to varies according to the historical context. For Chinese Catholics, it has special cultural and religious attributes and often directly refers to the “Vicariate Apostolic of Kiang-nan”, i.e., to a missionary district established by Rome. Considering that our research subject is related to the history of Catholicism in China, this study amalgamates the Jiangnan region with the territory of the Vicariate: the provinces of Jiangsu (Kiang-su) 江蘇 and Anhui (Ngan-hwei) 安徽, as delimited in the time of its existence.
- ² *Huikou*, also known as *tangkou* 堂口, corresponds to the basic missionary organization—a faith-based local community—of the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Kiang-nan. In the writings of French Jesuit missionaries, it is usually translated as “[une/la] chrétienté”. As missionaries and priests were few, many affairs of the local church were usually handled by the leaders of native believers’ communities. For more details, see Section 5.
- ³ For a study on the practice and understanding of the Eucharist in Chinese context during the Late Ming and Early Qing periods, see Hongfan Yang (2021).
- ⁴ *Mudao* 慕道, also known as *wangjiao* 望教, or *baoshou* 保守 in non-Confucian Catholic communities, means “catechumenate”. Correspondingly, those who have not yet been baptized in this stage can be called *mudaoyou* 慕道友, *wangjiaoyou* 望教友, or *baoshouzhe* 保守者. These terms all designate the catechumens. The latter can participate in the first half of the Mass, which includes teaching, reading scripture, and preaching, before the Eucharistic celebration.
- ⁵ The Jesuit Augustin Colombel, 1833–1905, first director of the Meteorological Observatory of Zikawei, is also the author of a history of the Jiangnan mission that has remained unpublished in French but was published and translated in Chinese. In his official history of the mission (*De La Servière* 1915), Joseph de la Servière points out both the quality and the shortcomings of Colombel’s manuscript, on which his own work largely relies.
- ⁶ “Those who sincerely wish to save their souls by following the teachings of the Church, have abandoned all heresies and are diligently studying the important scriptures and doctrines of the Church, are called *baoshou de ren* 保守的人.” (Twrdy [1887] 1907, vol. 3, p. 21).
- ⁷ Although this text comes from Xian County 獻縣, Hebei 河北, the situation it describes is similar to the one met by Catholic communities around Shanghai. For example, Father Gandar S.J. records that a family surnamed Cai in Beicai 北蔡, Pudong 浦東, “took out all their superstitious items and threw them into the river to show their intention to convert. They then hurriedly went to find the local church leader and asked to start learning the doctrines of the faith.” (Gandar 1885, p. 341)
- ⁸ 瞿太素 (pinyin: Qu Taisu) is romanized as *Chiutaisu* in Ricci (1953, p. 467).
- ⁹ The last rule was not applied at the beginning of the mission, especially for influential people (cf. Couplet 1688, p. 11).
- ¹⁰ The history of Zhangjialou can be tracked back to a steward of Xu Guangqi, from whom the parish takes its usual name. It retains strong local anchorage (see Vermander et al. 2018, p. 89).
- ¹¹ Rodolf Beaugendre (1844–1917): A French Jesuit of the Jiangnan Mission.
- ¹² Extreme unction is the name generally given to the sacrament before the Second Vatican Council. It is now known as the “Anointing of the sick”. Because our research period ends at the beginning of the Republic of China, the old name is still used.

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