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Celibacy, Chastity and Self-Cultivation in the Thought of Jesuits and Chinese Catholics in Late Ming and Early Qing China

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Abstract

This article examines Catholic celibacy from the late Ming to early Qing dynasty, revealing how Jesuit missionaries and Chinese Catholics interpreted and advocated for chastity. It highlights how missionaries such as Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni connected chastity with the ethical knowledge of self-cultivation and the doctrine of salvation, while adapting it to Chinese culture through Confucian concepts like subduing one's self. The article also explores the conflicts and integrations of chastity ideals among different intellectual traditions, such as the critiques by Buddhist monk Yunqi Zhuhong and Confucian scholar Xu Dashou, as well as how supporters like Yang Tingyun and Zhu Zongyuan reconciled Christian chastity with Confucian ideals of self-restraint and virtuous conduct.

Keywords: self-cultivation; Jesuits; Chinese Catholics



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1. Introduction

As a religious practice, chastity not only shaped the early Christian tradition but also became a significant topic in Sino-Western exchanges. Chastity was regarded as a crucial component of self-cultivation and was closely associated with sanctification (see [Xiao 2019](#), pp. xii–xv). In Peter Brown's study of early Christianity, he argues that sexual renunciation touched upon Christians' understanding of the body and sin, becoming a key spiritual practice and one of the metrics for spiritual achievement. It also triggered social debates and transformations concerning traditional roles and new communal relationships ([Brown 1990](#)). Beyond theological interpretations of celibacy and chastity, the divergence of celibacy from traditional Chinese family ethics further underscores the significance of studying this phenomenon ([Menegon 2003, 2004, 2009](#)).

Jesuit missionaries in late Ming China, including Matteo Ricci (1552–1610, Chinese name: 利玛窦), Alfonso Vagnone (1568–1640, Chinese name: 高一志), and Giulio Aleni (1582–1649, Chinese name: 艾儒略), praised the superiority of celibacy. Chastity is generally understood as the abstaining from unlawful or inappropriate sexual activity, whereas celibacy is the abstaining from all sexual activity.¹

However, the practice of celibacy posed a challenge to traditional Confucian family ethics in Chinese society. Choosing celibacy or virginity was viewed as a rejection of one's traditional social roles, thereby challenging the marriage and procreation-based social structure.

In contrast to the Catholic approach that sanctified chastity, Confucian widow chastity was centered on the secular ethics of spousal duty (fufu zhi yi, 夫妇之义). How did Jesuit missionaries argue for celibacy? What responses did they elicit from Chinese scholars?

Jacques Gernet argues that Christianity and Chinese civilization presented a clash of civilizations on ethical issues. He attributes the ultimate failure of Jesuit missionary activities in China to fundamental cultural misunderstandings between European missionaries and Chinese society. In the discussion of cultural conflicts, Jacques Gernet also addresses the issue of celibacy.² Focusing on Matteo Ricci and Diego de Pantoja, Lin Zhongze examines their views on celibacy and concubinage in his work. Lin contends that both sides viewed each other as fundamentally alien, leading to progressively deepening misunderstandings (Lin 2003, p. 26).

Moving beyond the framework of cultural conflict, Eugenio Menegon advances the study of celibacy by emphasizing cultural adaptation. His work primarily examines how Catholicism survived and became localized in Fu'an, Fujian, despite being labeled as heterodox and banned during the Qing dynasty. Menegon's research introduces a crucial female perspective, focusing on women's bodies, chastity, and virginity. He delves into how Spanish Dominican missionaries and their local supporters promoted female celibacy in Fu'an, interacting with entrenched Confucian notions of female virtue (particularly widow chastity) (Menegon 2004). Menegon's approach is distinctly social-historical, analyzing the socioreligious and political struggles over chastity and virginity in Fujian (Menegon 2003, 2009). Nadine Amsler's work, while not centering on celibacy, highlights the critical role of local Chinese supporters in assisting European missionaries with cultural adaptation strategies. Her focus lies on the role of women during the Ming-Qing transition (Amsler 2018, p. 6).

This paper aims to illuminate the complex intellectual dimensions of celibacy in Sino-Western exchanges during the Ming-Qing transition. Celibacy and chastity, as introduced by Jesuits, posed a significant challenge to traditional Chinese conceptions of desire, filial piety, and family relations. How late Ming Jesuits framed celibacy and chastity from the perspectives of asceticism and self-cultivation, alongside Chinese literati responses—whether critical or interpretive?³ It argues that chastity was embedded within a sin-redemption narrative, and to adapt it to Chinese culture, missionaries emphasized its connection to subduing one's self (keji, 克己), a key Confucian moral practice. To legitimize celibacy and chastity for Chinese audiences, the Jesuits and Chinese converts reconciled chastity with traditional Chinese ethical knowledge of self-cultivation (xiushen, 修身). Regarding how to achieve this self-cultivation as chastity, Giulio Aleni emphasized the constant remembrance of death. Alfonso Vagnone and Yang Tingyun mentioned the emulation of Christ, Mary, and other chaste saints.⁴

Part I analyzes Jesuit writings (Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci, Alfonso Vagnone, Diego de Pantoja, Giulio Aleni) to reveal how they interpreted celibacy's sacredness and practical implications within Catholic tradition. Part II focuses on the debates with Buddhist monk Zhuhong (株宏), exposing their fundamental disagreements on celibacy. This part also explores Chinese literati critiques, particularly Confucian scholar Xu Dashou's (徐大受) rejection of celibacy. Part III discusses Yang Tingyun (杨廷筠) and Zhu Zongyuan (朱宗元), who selectively accepted Christian celibacy while rejecting Buddhist practices.

2. The Interpretation of Celibacy and Chastity by Jesuit Missionaries

The works of Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), Matteo Ricci, Alfonso Vagnone, Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618), and Giulio Aleni addressed the subject of celibacy. However, each missionary's discussion of celibacy differed. We compare the differentiated arguments of Ruggieri, Ricci, Pantoja, Aleni, and Vagnone regarding the issue of celibacy from the perspectives of religious purpose, argumentation methods, and spiritual practice.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas focuses on discussing the following: (1) chastity as a virtue; (2) celibacy as part of chastity; (3) lust as opposed to chastity (Shapcote 2017,

II-II, Q. 151–54). Q. 151 explicitly classifies chastity as a virtue, emphasizing its regulation of desires through the right reason (Shapcote 2017, Q. 151). In Q. 152, Aquinas examines celibacy. In A. 4, Aquinas explains that the chastity of marriage is praiseworthy only because it restrains unlawful pleasures; therefore, its excellence does not surpass ordinary chastity. However, while the chastity of widows surpasses ordinary chastity, it does not reach the ultimate state of complete abstinence from carnal pleasures; only virginity attains this state. Thus, virginity alone is ranked as a special virtue beyond chastity (Shapcote 2017, Q. 152, A. 4, p. 449).

Tianzhu shilu, 天主实录 (“The True Record of the Lord of Heaven”, 1584) became the first Chinese work to systematically introduce Catholic doctrine to Chinese literati. In *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven*, Michele Ruggieri positioned Catholic celibacy as an ecclesiastical discipline applicable only to those in religious life. For those who do not follow a religious path, there is no wrongdoing. However, if one pursues a religious life yet clings to wealth or marries to secure an heir, their offense is profound. Chapter 15 of *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven* discusses how there are only three things in the world that can tempt people to sin: first, acting on one’s own will; second, coveting carnal desires; third, pursuing wealth. True practitioners must abide by three sacred principles. Those who reject material riches and bodily pleasures to serve the Divine with undivided hearts stand far above those who chase marriage and earthly treasures. By embracing these three vows, the faithful may swiftly attain spiritual liberation and heavenly ascent. Thus, those who walk this path hold steadfast to these commandments. First, live in communal harmony, guided in all things by the wisdom of elders; second, purify oneself by shunning sensual indulgence; third, relinquish worldly gain, trusting in divine providence for sustenance (Canaris 2023, p. 172).

This proposition falls within the framework of the Evangelical Counsels and spiritual exercises, specifically Jesuit obedience, chastity, and evangelical poverty. Ruggieri’s formulation also echoes the institutionalized monastic life of the Jesuits following the Council of Trent (1545–1563) (O’Malley 1993, pp. 3–4). Moreover, this position derives from Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas held that perpetual chastity indeed belongs to the evangelical counsels of the New Law. Aquinas states in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q. 108, The precepts of the New Law pertain to essential obligations for attaining eternal salvation—the direct path ordained by divine commandment. In contrast, the counsels concern voluntary practices that, though not required, enable a more secure and expedient journey toward the same heavenly reward (Shapcote 2017, pp. 71–114, Q.108, a.4, p. 435).

Aquinas systematically expounded the theological status of the evangelical counsels. He explicitly stated that perpetual chastity in the New Law belongs to the category of evangelical counsels. The precepts of the New Law concern matters necessary for obtaining eternal happiness—these precepts directly guide believers toward the ultimate end. In contrast to precepts, the counsels enable the attainment of eternal happiness with greater certainty.

The title of this chapter employs the term “诚心修行升天” (sincerely cultivating practice to ascend to heaven) to denote its purpose (Canaris 2023, p. 172). This terminology serves to analogize the Christian concepts of the salvation of the soul and union with God. Ruggieri correlates the Confucian notion of sincerely cultivating practice with following God’s commandments, while ascending to heaven corresponds to entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

In contrast to Ruggieri, who explicitly promotes celibacy as a means to ascend to heaven, Matteo Ricci does not directly address its spiritual benefits. Ricci focused on discussing how to combat original sin through practices like celibacy and self-cultivation. Ricci connected the celibacy with Confucian self-cultivation, while emphasizing its ultimate goal points to union with God.

In *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主实义 (“The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven”, 1603), Matteo Ricci employed a dialogic format to address the doubts raised by the Chinese literatus (中士) (Tan 2013). Regarding the rejection of sexual relations (绝色), the Chinese literatus expressed bewilderment at the existence of a precept requiring lifelong celibacy (such as maintaining absolute virginity). The literatus argued that humans are born with emotional desires, making complete abstinence theoretically difficult to achieve. Since the nature of all creation, as endowed by Heaven, is fundamentally procreative, how can the ancestral bloodline passed down through generations be arbitrarily severed? The literatus raised three objections: (1) human instinct makes it inherently hard to suppress; (2) perpetual generation (生生) reflects the very nature of the Lord of Heaven; (3) it violates the responsibility to continue the family lineage (Ricci 2016, p. 527).

In response to the Chinese literatus’s questioning, regarding the point about human instincts being difficult to suppress, Matteo Ricci responded by acknowledging that celibacy presents a significant challenge to human nature. For this reason, he explained, the Divine Lawgiver deliberately excluded it from mandatory commandments, instead offering it as a voluntary spiritual discipline. While recognizing its inherent difficulty, Ricci emphasized that this very challenge serves as a profound test of moral character—particularly in cultivating exceptional self-discipline, which represents one of the most demanding aspects of spiritual cultivation (Ricci 2016, p. 529).

Ricci particularly stressed that celibacy, given its extreme demands on human nature, was never mandated by divine law as a universal obligation. Instead, the Heavenly Sovereign established it as an optional spiritual discipline—permitting individuals to embrace it voluntarily according to their personal devotion and capacity. Those drawn to this higher calling might freely undertake it, while others remained unconstrained by such rigorous requirements (Ricci 2016, p. 528). This perspective aligns with Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the evangelical counsels; Ricci’s position thus reflects a balanced approach, while acknowledging the excellence of celibate life, he avoids absolutizing it as a necessary requirement for salvation.

Regarding the Chinese literatus’s argument that perpetual generation reflects the nature of God, Matteo Ricci articulated a profound theological perspective on divine sovereignty over existence. He maintained that the Creator holds ultimate authority over both life’s beginning and its end, representing not two separate intentions but a single unified divine will. Before time began and the universe was formed, when no living beings yet existed, the essential nature of life already resided within God’s eternal being. Human understanding, being limited and imperfect, cannot fully comprehend the infinite mind of the supreme Deity. True alignment with divine will, Ricci explained, involves more than merely valuing procreation—it requires embracing the complete cycle of existence, including its natural conclusion as part of God’s perfect design (Ricci 2016, p. 530).

Regarding the Chinese literatus’s argument about the responsibility of familial continuation, Matteo Ricci responded that to abstain from marriage delays the bearing of children but hastens the generation of virtues (生道) (Ricci 2016, p. 534). Ricci’s deep observation of Chinese culture also led him to recognize existing practices of chastity. For instance, some chaste women who had lost their fiancés before marriage refused remarriage to preserve their honor. They guarded virtue without second thoughts (守义无二). Confucianism praised such behavior, and emperors even publicly honored it. This form of chastity, which intentionally halts the transmission of life to descendants solely out of spousal fidelity, earned widespread acclaim when women remained unmarried in their households (Ricci 2016, p. 535).

The Chinese literatus questioned whether marriage conflicts with preaching virtue (Ricci 2016, p. 537). In response, Matteo Ricci emphasized the superiority of virginity,

presenting eight arguments for celibacy. Ricci argued that abstaining from sexual desire constitutes overcoming lust, which he believed obscures morality. Sexual desire, he claimed, darkens the human spirit, making it difficult to grasp the profundity of ethical principles. By practicing asceticism, cultivators purge their minds of worldly defilements, thereby increasing spiritual clarity and refining their understanding of moral subtleties (Ricci 2016, p. 540). The text articulates that cultivating moral character requires restraining sensory impulses. Zhu Xi maintained that while sensory desires are inherent to human nature, their unrestrained pursuit inevitably degrades one's fundamental moral consciousness, presenting a crucial ethical consideration for all who pursue scholarly cultivation (Zhu 1983, p. 374).

Ricci reinforced his theological position by drawing parallels with Western medical theory's concept of balancing bodily humors. He suggested a spiritual application of this principle—just as physicians administer cooling remedies for feverish conditions and warming treatments for chills, missionaries renounce worldly wealth through voluntary poverty and combat carnal temptation through deliberate chastity. This medical-spiritual analogy framed religious discipline as a form of soul-healing, where opposing virtues serve as corrective treatments for moral imbalances (Ricci 2016, p. 541).

Subduing one's self constitutes another argument of Ricci for renouncing marriage. The work of self-mastery is harder than mastering the world (Ricci 2016, p. 542). Ricci employed the Confucian concept of “keji” to justify celibacy, using it as a bridge to facilitate understanding and acceptance. The term “keji” originates from the *Analects*. In the *Analects*, Confucius responds to Yan Yuan's inquiry about benevolence by defining it as the practice of self-discipline to restore proper ritual conduct. This classical exchange later received authoritative interpretation from Zhu Xi, who specifically parsed the critical term “ke” as signifying the act of conquering or overcoming. He elaborated that this refers to the fundamental struggle against one's own selfish impulses and personal desires. Thus, Zhu Xi understood “keji” as the active, conscious struggle against and overcoming of personal desires. His interpretation of “ke” underscores the intentional discipline central to Confucian self-cultivation (Pan 2021).

The Chinese literatus then raised questions regarding filial piety (孝). Matteo Ricci articulated his core argument in the form of the “Doctrine of Three Fathers” (三父说). He posited that every person in the world has three fathers: God (天主), the Sovereign (国君), and the Family Father (家君). Those who defy the will of any of these three fathers are unfilial sons. Ricci argued that in a well-ordered world (天下有道), the commands of the lower fathers (the Sovereign and Family Father) would not conflict with the will of the highest Father (God). Thus, obedience to one inherently encompassed filial devotion to all three. However, in times of moral chaos (天下无道), where the commands of the three fathers clashed, Ricci asserted that a son must prioritize the higher authority. If one obeyed the superior (God or the Sovereign) while disobeying the inferior (the Family Father), this did not violate filial piety. But if one obeyed the inferior while defying the superior, this constituted unfilial behavior. Ricci partially acknowledged Confucian Five Relationships (五伦) and filial piety, accepting the graded nature of human bonds. His strategy was to “graft” Catholic thought onto traditional Chinese ethical principles (纲常名教) to minimize cultural dissonance. Yet Ricci's “Doctrine of Three Fathers” and its hierarchy (First God, then the Sovereign, then the Family Father) fundamentally altered the Confucian understanding of filial piety, which was rooted in kinship love (亲亲) and devotion to parents. Catholicism, by contrast, prioritized “revering and serving God” (尊崇昭事天主) as the primary duty, elevating the human-God relationship to the Great Bond (大伦) above all other human relations (Ricci 2016, p. 558; see Lin 2002; Lü 2018).

The doctrine of original sin in Augustine's theology was expounded by late Ming Jesuits such as Alfonso Vagnone (see [Zhou 2022](#)). Original sin refers to the transgression committed by the first humans, Adam and Eve, when they violated God's commandment. This sin caused them to lose all the graces bestowed by God, leading to the advent of illness, carnal desire, calamities, and death. The sin of the first ancestors was transmitted to all humanity; therefore, every person born from the womb carries original sin ([Quinn 2010](#), pp. 614–21).

The issue of celibacy is directly linked to lust, one of the seven deadly sins, and is also connected to the doctrines of original sin, redemption, and sanctification. Although *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* does not explicitly use the term original sin, it outlines its concept that humanity's ancestors corrupted the very foundation of human nature. As their descendants, we inherit this lingering defect, unable to fully restore the integrity of our innate nature—born already flawed. Moreover, as people imitate one another, they develop numerous vices. Thus, it is no surprise that some doubt human nature's inherent goodness, claiming it has nothing to do with God ([Ricci 2016](#), p. 578).

But as human goodness has weakened and evil habits have taken root, people easily sink into wickedness and struggle to cultivate virtue. With paternal compassion, God, since ancient times, has sent the Holy Spirit across generations to raise up exemplars for them. Yet, as simple and honest customs gradually faded, the sages departed, those chasing desires multiplied, and those following heavenly principles grew scarce. To depict humanity's fall, Ricci employed the Neo-Confucian dichotomy between “desires” (欲) and “principle” (理) ([Ricci 2016](#), p. 579). In his theological exposition, Ricci emphasized how divine compassion manifested through God's personal incarnation for humanity's salvation. This redemptive act, he explained, demonstrated heaven's boundless mercy toward all creation. Within this discussion of the incarnation, Ricci naturally incorporated Marian theology, particularly addressing both the perpetual virginity of Christ's mother and the miraculous nature of Jesus' own birth as evidence of supernatural intervention in human history ([Ricci 2016](#), p. 580).

In *Tianzhu jiaoyao* 天主教要 (“Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven”, 1605), Matteo Ricci explicitly employed the term original sin. The theological discussion then turned to the fate of unbaptized infants. According to this doctrine, these innocent souls occupy a unique spiritual state—having neither accumulated personal merits to warrant heavenly reward nor committed actual sins that would condemn them to damnation. Their condition stems solely from the ancestral taint of Adam's original sin (原罪), resulting in existence in an intermediate realm that transcends conventional concepts of either reward or punishment. Limbo of the Infants represents neither the joys of paradise nor the sufferings of perdition, but rather a neutral existence determined solely by humanity's shared fallen nature ([Ricci 2002](#), p. 320; [Hu 2007](#), p. 19; on the textual history of *Tianzhu jiaoyao*, see [Dudink 2002](#)).

The Spanish missionary Diego de Pantoja's Chinese work *Seven Victories* 七克 (Qike, 1614) introduced the “seven capital sins” in Christian theology and their corresponding remedies, extending Matteo Ricci's interpretation of subduing one's self. The title *Seven Victories* itself reflects this concept of “overcoming the self.” Lust and the corresponding virtue of chastity—abstinence to conquer sexual temptation—are framed within the sin-redemption narrative, embedding the idea of self-mastery into a theological framework.

A prominent argument in *Seven Victories* supporting celibacy is that excessive sexual desire is a sin. Pantoja argues that legitimate sexual relations should be solely for procreation. Through temperance, individuals can return to a state devoid of libido. Pantoja discusses young couples maintaining virginity in both heart and conduct, “regarding each other as siblings, inwardly free from impure thoughts, outwardly free from impure acts”

(de Pantoja 2013a, p. 136). Similarly, in *Quan ren lei yuan shi* 论人类原始 (“On the Primordial State of Humanity”), Pantoja describes Adam and Eve regarding each other as siblings (de Pantoja 2002, p. 229). Pantoja posits that the primordial state of humanity involved a rejection of sexuality and a transcendence of bodily senses. Whether Adam and Eve engaged in sexual relations before the Fall has been a contentious topic. Manichaeans argued that Adam and Eve either had no sexual relations or reproduced in a non-sexual manner. Augustine’s key argument was that prelapsarian sexual union would have been fully governed by the will, devoid of libido or carnal disturbance. The mainstream interpretation holds that Augustine believed Adam and Eve would have had sex before the Fall but without libido and under rational control (see Brown 1990, p. 402; Hunter 1994).

Pantoja’s portrayal of the primordial state—where Adam and Eve regarded each other as siblings advocates for absolute purity that encompasses both the mind’s chastity and the body’s conduct. The doctrine insists on complete sanctification at both the psychological and physical levels.

The *Seven Victories* provides a clear definition of chastity (Zhen De, 贞德) as the complete elimination of carnal desire (Jue yin yu zhi yuan ye, 绝淫欲之愿也). This concept is systematically categorized into three distinct levels. Marital chastity constitutes the basic level where couples restrict themselves to proper sexual relations (Zheng Se, 正色) only at appropriate times while thoroughly eliminating all improper desires from both thoughts and speech. Widowed chastity represents the intermediate level where some choose remarriage while others maintain lifelong chastity (Shou Jie, 守节) by abstaining from remarriage and eradicating all proper sexual desires in mind and word. Virgin chastity stands as the highest form requiring complete freedom from sexual desire in heart and absolute physical purity throughout one’s entire life from birth to death. Regarding spiritual rewards for these different forms of chastity, scriptural teachings indicate thirtyfold blessings for marital chastity, sixty-fold for widowed chastity, and the fullest hundred-fold reward reserved for perpetual virginity (de Pantoja 2013a; see also de Pantoja 2013b). As mentioned above, this discussion originates from Aquinas (Shapcote 2017, Q. 152, A. 4, p. 449).

Alfonso Vagnone’s *Xiushen xixue* 修身西学 (“The Western Study of Personal Cultivation”, 1637–1638) contains a similar discussion. The work places the restraint of lust under the branch of temperance (Chapter 8). Vagnone systematically classifies chastity as a specific aspect within the broader virtue of temperance. This framework identifies four distinct dimensions of temperate practice. The moderation of food consumption addresses the control of gluttonous tendencies. The regulation of alcohol intake governs drunkenness. The discipline of marital relations establishes proper boundaries for sexual activity. The management of social interactions maintains appropriate levels of personal intimacy (Vagnoni 2019, p. 229; see Tan 2018).

Chastity manifests in three distinct expressions. The supreme form represents complete spiritual and physical purity maintained throughout one’s entire existence without any defilement whatsoever. The middle form applies to widowed individuals who after marriage choose permanent abstinence symbolized by the broken lute string for widowers or the severed pair for widows. The foundational form describes married couples maintaining proper sexual boundaries within harmonious marital relations without any deviation (Vagnoni 2019, p. 231).

Because this passage was attacked by opponents as supporting gender equality, Alfonso Vagnone may have deliberately emphasized “the husband commands, the wife obeys” (夫令妇从) in multiple instances in *Qijia Xixue* 齐家西学 (“The Western Learning on Managing the Family”, 1632).⁵ Vagnone analogized the husband–wife relationship to that of the sun and moon, thereby justifying male authority (Vagnoni 2019, p. 17).

The Western Learning on Managing the Family alludes to the biblical figures of Adam and Eve without explicitly naming them. It presents a worldview where nothing possesses absolute self-sufficiency, as all created things exist in interdependence. The narrative describes how the Creator, after forming the first man, immediately fashioned a woman to complement him, establishing the fundamental marital union that brings domestic harmony and perpetuates moral virtue across generations. This account emphasizes the essential spousal responsibilities rooted in reciprocal love, mutual assistance, interdependence and complementary fulfillment. The ideal marital relationship manifests when partners care for each other during illness, console each other in grief, guide each other when lost, correct each other's errors, restrain each other's recklessness, and properly bury each other in death. Their cooperative household management divides responsibilities between external acquisition and internal stewardship, maintaining harmonious leadership and followership while working toward shared goals with united effort, providing mutual support and comfort throughout their lives until old age (Vagnoni 2019, pp. 74–75).

In both *The Western Learning on Managing the Family* and *The Western Study of Personal Cultivation*, Vagnone avoided the controversial question of whether sexual relations exist in heaven. He did not mention Adam and Eve's procreation of offspring, instead focusing first on the shared life of husband and wife. It can be inferred that Vagnone's ambiguity here relates to the controversy over whether Adam and Eve engaged in sexual relations.

In contrast to his earlier works that combined theory and rhetoric while prioritizing theoretical discourse, Alfonso Vagnone's *Tianzhu Shengjiao Shengren Xingshi* 天主教圣人行实 ("Biographies of the Saints of the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven", 1629) adopts a narrative style. This shift stems from Vagnone's deep recognition of the didactic function of exempla. Compared to abstract reasoning, rhetorical expressions blending fables, anecdotes, and life scenes could more vividly engage audiences and effectively transmit moral principles. *Biographies of the Saints of the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven* is an abridged adaptation of the 13th century *Legenda Aurea*. Among its 75 saints, 51 are male and 24 female. These women are divided into two groups: 12 virgin saints and 12 chaste widows. If female saints were canonized for their virginity, Alfonso Vagnone translated their designation as Virgin Saints (童身圣女). His translation selected biographies of twelve virgin saints from the *Legenda Aurea*. These Virgin Saints are described as women of lofty resolve, who from youth to old age, neither married nor were defiled and diligently cultivated purity of body and spirit, ultimately entering sainthood. Another category of female saints consists of married women, whom Vagnone's translation terms Holy Matrons or Chaste Widows. Most Chaste Holy Matrons pursued spiritual cultivation after marriage. Though they married for various reasons, once they had borne children and fulfilled their duty of continuing the lineage, they immediately sought their husbands' consent to renounce sexual relations. All seventy-four saints included in *Biographies of the Saints of the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven* achieved this standard when measured by abstinence from lust (戒淫). The prohibition against sexual immorality stands as one of the fundamental Ten Commandments ordained by divine authority for all Christians to observe, with saints held to an even higher standard as exemplars of faith. This contrasts sharply with the Chinese Confucian tradition where sages approached such matters through the principle of moderating desires and channeling emotions properly within the framework of ritual propriety. Where Confucian practice emphasizes balanced regulation, Catholic spirituality demands complete renunciation of sexual desire as the required path for sanctity (see Menegon 2004; Li 2010; Xiao 2019).

Alfonso Vagnone's *Sheng Mu Xing Shi* 圣母行实 ("Life of the Virgin Mary", 1631) primarily focuses on the Catholic theological doctrine of Mariology, emphasizing the Virgin Mary's compassion for humanity. However, Vagnone also addresses the mystery of her

virginal conception by the Holy Spirit (Li et al. 2014). In Chapter 3 of *Life of the Virgin Mary*, titled “The Virgin Mary Rescues the Chaste from Peril,” Vagnone recounts eleven stories of the Virgin Mary aiding chaste men and women in avoiding defilement. One of these chastity narratives echoes “The Life of St. Cunegund, Queen and Widow” in *Lives of the Saints of the Holy Catholic Church*, Chapter 7 (On Widowhood), Story 8. St. Henry II (972–1024) and St. Cunegund of Luxembourg (c. 978–1040) voluntarily renounced physical relations due to religious ideals, embracing a life of ascetic abstinence. When Cunegund was falsely accused of infidelity, to prove her innocence, she walked barefoot over red-hot plowshares. A voice from heaven—the Virgin Mary’s—assured her of divine protection, and she emerged unharmed from the ordeal. Henry, witnessing this miracle, held her in even higher esteem (Li et al. 2014, pp. 404–8).

Similar to Matteo Ricci, Giulio Aleni also pointed out that few could maintain lifelong chastity. The early 17th century text *Kouduo richao* 口铎日抄 (“Diary of Oral Admonitions”) preserves a theological discussion attributed to Saint Augustine regarding marital chastity. Augustine reportedly engaged in debate on this matter, acknowledging marriage as the normative path for most people while questioning how many could realistically maintain lifelong celibacy. He suggested excessive concern about this might be unnecessary, yet proposed a profound counterargument about eschatological possibilities. Augustine’s reasoning contemplated a scenario where universal chastity might lead to human extinction through non-procreation before the world’s end. He contrasted this with the actual anticipated end times containing both righteous and wicked people. The saint speculated whether voluntary human cessation through perfect chastity might represent a preferable alternative, creating a reality containing only perfected goodness without evil. In such a case, Augustine suggested this outcome would bring greater comfort to the Divine Heart in its mission, while also representing the ultimate fulfillment of humanity’s devotional purpose in serving God through perfected virtue (Aleni and Li 2017; cf. Xiao 2015).

Diary of Oral Admonitions further discusses how the method of preserving chastity lies in meditating on death, for death stems from sin. The speaker employed a vivid metaphor to illustrate this spiritual discipline comparing it to encountering potential mortal danger. Just as one would maintain absolute focus when facing an archer’s drawn bow refusing even to glance at passing beauty out of life-preserving instinct, so must the faithful cultivate such single-minded devotion through constant awareness of divine judgment. This unceasing consciousness of God’s solemn presence naturally purges lustful impulses with only reverential awe proving capable of restraining carnal passions. Aleni supplemented this teaching with an instructive anecdote about a European monarch’s misunderstanding. Upon learning of young Jesuit missionaries maintaining perfect chastity, the king initially suspected they possessed some pharmacological suppressant. His subsequent discovery revealed their true method lies in *memento mori*, the perpetual meditation on mortality. This epiphany demonstrated how contemplating life’s transience and posthumous judgment inherently diminishes earthly attachments. The clarity brought by death and recognition of the body’s inevitable return to dust and exposing sensual pleasures as fleeting illusions ultimately makes chastity attainable. These reflections confirm chastity’s preeminent position among virtues (Aleni and Li 2017, p. 404).

Giulio Aleni emphasized that original sin, through the corruption and defilement of human nature, leads to death, while preserving virginity overcomes this tainted nature inherited from original sin. The Augustinian thought, which exerted a decisive influence on the Middle Ages, established a direct connection between sexuality and original sin. Within sexual renunciation lies a fear of spiritual death, appealing to a yearning for the transcendent beyond (Brown 1990, pp. XII–XV).

Regarding the purpose of abstaining from desire to overcome lust, Matteo Ricci emphasized original sin and redemption, noting that the Virgin Mary's virginity was central to her association with celibacy. Her virginity holds unique theological significance, particularly in relation to Christ's birth, and is regarded as transcending natural law. The Virgin Mary's chastity is seen as both a model and a sign for all virgins.

Christ Himself provided direct justification for celibacy. The Gospels mention those who "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12), interpreted as a voluntary choice of celibacy for higher spiritual pursuits, namely, the Kingdom of God. Christ is viewed as the exemplar for celibates, and following His example is one reason many adopt a life of sexual renunciation.

Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci, Diego de Pantoja, Alfonso Vagnone, and Giulio Aleni argued that abstinence and celibacy facilitate higher spiritual benefits and a closer relationship with God. Ricci stressed that asceticism was considered a "renunciation of sexuality" for the few, a state of undisturbed peace and freedom. Ascetics strive to possess a "virginal heart" and an "undefiled body", purifying the soul. For missionaries, celibacy was more conducive to spreading the Gospel.

Compared to marriage, chastity was regarded as a higher good and, for those capable of it, more blessed than wedlock. Through sexual renunciation, one could pursue the supreme good (*summum bonum*). Asceticism was the path to true blessedness (*vera beatitudo*), and renouncing lust allowed for faster attainment of the transcendent beyond.

3. Criticism of Celibacy and Chastity Among Late Ming Literati

Matteo Ricci's critiques of Buddhism in *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven* provoked rebuttals from Buddhist scholars (Meynard 2017). Matteo Ricci rejected the concept of reincarnation, arguing that if people believed in transmigration into other humans, it would lead to marital chaos. One could never know whether their spouse might have been their own mother in a previous life (Ricci 2016, p. 282).

Lianchi Zhuhong (蓮池祿宏, 1535–1615), one of the Four Great Late Ming Buddhist Masters, engaged in debates with Catholics and authored *Tianshuo siduan* 天說四端 ("Four Essays on Heaven", 1615) to refute their arguments, including those on marriage (see Xiao 2013). For Buddhists, the issue of marriage is linked to reincarnation and, by extension, filial piety.

The Catholic community, writing in Matteo Ricci's voice, composed a response to Zhuhong's *Four Essays on Heaven*, titled *Bianxue Yidu* 辯學遺牒 ("Posthumous Polemics", 1617).⁶ The Catholic community's reply to the Great Monk Zhuhong's *Four Essays on Heaven* features a profound intellectual dialogue on marriage ethics and reincarnation between the two sides.

Late Ming Catholic scholars identified what they saw as a fundamental distinction between Catholic and Buddhist approaches to celibacy. This theological debate specifically engaged with the Buddhist *Fanwangjing* 梵網經 ("Brahmajala Sutra") and its teaching about the potential karmic connections between all sentient beings.

The Catholic argument developed a logical critique based on the *Brahmajala Sutra's* premise that any being might have been one's parent in previous existences. They reasoned this would create impossible ethical dilemmas if followed consistently. According to their interpretation, this doctrine would logically prohibit marriage since spouses or concubines might have shared parental relationships in past lives. The same principle would forbid employing servants who might have ancestral connections. Even using horses or mules for transportation would become problematic under this framework. According to this, late Ming Catholic scholars emphasized that while Catholic practice did not impose universal celibacy requirements, Buddhist doctrine strictly enforced monastic chastity for all practitioners.⁷

Zhuhong replied that the *Brahmajala Sutra* proposes this view solely to sternly prohibit killing. It means that across countless kalpas (Ganges River sands of eons), sentient beings undergo endless reincarnation, each life having parents. The sutra raises this concern to caution against possibility, not to assert inevitability. Zhuhong also argued that Confucianism has similar principles. Rites prohibit same-surname marriages; therefore, when purchasing a concubine, if her surname is unknown, divination is used. If the divination shows no shared surname, marriage is harmless. Similarly, if unsure whether a wife was one's parent, divination could clarify; if not, marriage is permissible. *The Book of Rites* states that those twice one's age should be served as fathers. Prohibiting killing is the clear teaching of the Great Way. Marriage, using carriages/horses, and employing servants are mundane norms—they cannot be equated with the cruelty of killing. Thus, the sutra only says “do not kill any sentient being,” not “do not marry or employ any sentient being.” (Ricci 2013, pp. 1501–502). Zhuhong, through Confucian ritual analogies, explained the meaning of Buddhist prohibitions against killing, emphasizing that the core purpose was to avoid harming beings who might have kinship ties, not to negate the normal order of human life.

In *Posthumous Polemics*, the Catholic scholars responded that the Lord of Heaven does not subject humans to reincarnation. What *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* argues is precisely to disprove reincarnation. If the Lord of Heaven created beings, allowing humans to be reborn as animals without their knowledge—and if these animals might have been their parents in past lives—then killing, eating, or riding them would become grave sins. This would mean the Lord of Heaven has turned the world into a grand trap to deceive people. Thus, we can conclude that the Lord would never permit humans to be reborn as beasts. The text further asserts that reincarnation cannot be proven. Since the non-existence of reincarnation is established, animals may be killed and used. Humans may marry and employ servants (Ricci 2013, p. 1504).

Through logical reasoning, the text denies reincarnation, arguing that the Lord of Heaven would never permit humans to be reborn as animals or other humans, thereby justifying killing, marriage and servitude. It also critiques the emptiness and unreliability of reincarnation theory. Late Ming Catholics affirmed ascetic celibacy as a virtuous practice of self-mastery, meanwhile they criticized reincarnation doctrine for utterly rejecting marriage.

Xu Dashou (许大受, 1580–1650), a Neo-Confucian scholar from Deqing, Zhejiang, studied under the late Ming Buddhist master Yunqi Zhuhong and briefly became a catechumen in the early Tianqi era (1621–1627), engaging closely with Giulio Aleni. By 1623, however, he turned against Christianity (Xu 2018, pp. 1–77, 166–223). In *Shengchao Zuobi* 圣朝佐辟 (“Assisting the holy Dynasty in the refuting [of heterodoxy]”), Xu criticized the Catholic position on chastity, particularly its implications for male chastity and Confucian familial ethics. He argued that the constancy in chaste virtue brings good fortune to women but misfortune to men. Thus, this is clear that wives should follow husbands, but husbands must never follow wives (Xu 2018, p. 114).

Thomistic Catholic teaching ranks chastity in three levels: marital monogamy, widowed abstinence, and lifelong virginity. This tripartite system applies equally to men and women without distinction (de Pantoja 2013a, 2013b). Xu Dashou contended that this framework would make husbands subordinate to wives. Even emperors would be restricted to one wife. The system would designate widowed husbands as mere survivors and condemn any remarriage even in cases of childlessness as dehumanizing behavior (Xu 2018, p. 114). The Jesuits believed that chastity for both men and women was conducive to virtue, whereas Xu Dashou argued that only women needed to remain chaste, while men did not. This fully illustrates the focal point of their conflict.

Xu Dashou further criticized the missionaries for prohibiting concubinage, which he argued led to child maltreatment. The missionaries' teachings emphasized that in their homeland, refusing to take concubines was regarded as virtuous behavior, while lacking male heirs did not constitute a serious moral failing. There's a person with the surname Zhou. When he heard this doctrine, he immediately sent away his concubine, who is the mother of his son. The present whereabouts of this child remain uncertain (Xu 2018, p. 115).

Xu Dashou further criticized the missionaries' engagement with female converts which he believed subverted conventional propriety (Xu 2018, pp. 115–16). He acknowledged the missionaries' superficial rhetoric condemning lust, yet accused them of harboring actual greed. Although missionaries' doctrine professed strict gender segregation, Xu argued that their rituals—involving holy water and holy oil—facilitated improper interactions between men and women (Xu 2018, p. 138).

4. Yang Tingyun and Zhu Zongyuan's Understanding on Celibacy and Chastity

The late Ming Catholic Confucian scholar Yang Tingyun (1562–1627) authored several apologetic works defending Catholicism, including *Daiyi pian* 代疑篇 (“Resolving Doubts”, 1921) and *Tianshi mingbian* 天释明辨 (“Distinguishing Clearly Between Christianity and Buddhism”, 1921), both of which discuss chastity (Standaert 1988, p. 159). *Distinguishing Clearly Between Christianity and Buddhism* examines the similarities and differences between Christianity and Buddhism, with a dedicated section analyzing prohibitions against sexual immorality.

In this section, Yang Tingyun presents a detailed comparison of how Buddhism and Catholicism (referred to as the “Heavenly Teaching”) interpret and practice prohibitions against lust. His analysis aims to expose the hypocrisy of Buddhist precepts while demonstrating the moral rigor and nobility of Catholic teachings on marriage. Yang begins by questioning the authenticity of Buddhist prohibitions against lust. He observes that while Buddhism appears to adopt principles similar to Catholicism's Sixth Commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”) and Ninth Commandment (“You shall not covet your neighbor's wife”), its actual practice diverges significantly. Buddhism advocates the complete eradication of sexual desire, even demanding strict celibacy from monks. Yet in reality, many monks fail to uphold these vows, secretly indulging in lustful behavior, rendering their so-called “prohibitions” empty and hypocritical. This discrepancy between doctrine and practice, Yang argues, not only undermines Buddhism's own teachings but also weakens its moral authority (Wu 1986).⁸

By contrast, Catholicism provides clearer and more humane guidance on marriage and sexual ethics. Catholicism does not reject marriage but instead upholds monogamous marriage as “licit and proper”, the morally correct path. Marriage is seen not only as the foundation of procreation but also as a fundamental aspect of human relationships. What Catholicism condemns is “illicit lust” (Xie yin, 邪淫)—including polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, and homosexual acts—which disrupts moral order and must be strictly forbidden (Wu 1986, pp. 278–79).

Yang particularly criticizes the widespread male licentiousness in society, where many men, dissatisfied with monogamy, take concubines or visit brothels, behaving no better than beasts. He argues that Catholicism's condemnation of such behavior carries profound moral justification.

Yang Tingyun expressed profound admiration for the chaste lifestyle of Western scholars, particularly the celibacy practiced by Jesuit priests and other clergy. He viewed this complete mastery of desire through reason as representing a higher moral state, one that

perfectly aligned with Catholic doctrine. In contrast, while Buddhism outwardly promoted asceticism, many monks failed to uphold it in practice. Catholicism, however, ensured the purity of its followers in marriage and sexual ethics through strict religious discipline and moral demands.

Yang marveled at the seriousness with which Catholicism approached prohibitions against lust, seeing it as a testament to its moral superiority. Through such comparisons and critiques, he sought to highlight the ethical superiority of Catholic practice. When discussing the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara), Yang noted that while both the Virgin Mary and Guanyin intercede for humanity and offer salvation, they differ fundamentally. He pointed out that Guanyin might originally have been male, whereas Mary was a woman from Judea. God, foreseeing her exceptional virtue surpassing all humanity, specially chose her to be the mother of Christ. Filled with divine grace beyond compare—as Scripture says, “full of grace” (Luke 1:28)—she recognized the child in her womb as Jesus and, even when he was an infant, revered him as the Lord (Wu 1986, pp. 283–86).

In *Resolving Doubts*, Yang clarified that while Catholicism does not forbid marriage, it holds chastity in higher esteem as a sublime virtue. Monks preserve virginity to emulate Christ, priests maintain purity to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, and missionaries remain unattached to families to spread the Gospel freely. Among all virtues, chastity stands supreme—exemplified by the Virgin Mary, whose flawless chastity made her worthy to be Christ’s mother. Male believers follow Jesus as their model, while women imitate Mary. In the West, many youths enter religious life early, striving to meet this highest standard of faith (see Yang 1982, p. 591).

Though Matteo Ricci had passed away before Zhu Zongyuan’s birth (c. 1615–1617), Zhu came into contact with and inherited Ricci’s intellectual framework through the enduring influence of the Accommodation Method and Ricci’s foundational works. Zhu’s first major work, *Da Ke Wen 答客问* (“Responses to a Guest’s Questions”, composed around 1631 or 1632), adopted this fictional dialogue format, not only continuing Ricci’s syncretic approach but also deepening the interpreting Christianity through Confucianism tradition with localized expressions.

Zhu further contributed to the printing of Manuel Dias’s *An Explication of the Ten Commandments of the Holy Catholic Faith*, writing one of its prefaces. In it, he praised the wisdom of the Decalogue, which forms the foundation of Catholic moral law and directly defines the nature of sin (Sachsenmaier 2018, p. 47). While Yang Tingyun wrote a preface for Pantoja’s *Seven Victories*, he rarely addressed original sin—a concept Zhu explored extensively under the influence of Ricci, Pantoja, and Dias.

In his work *Responses to a Guest’s Questions*, Zhu Zongyuan thoroughly engaged with the missionary teachings on celibacy. He addressed the apparent contradiction in Western scholars maintaining lifelong virginity while abstaining from ancestral sacrifices. Zhu resolved this by noting that while these individuals might discontinue their personal branch of sacrificial rites, their brothers would preserve the family lineage, thus ensuring the ancestral tradition continued uninterrupted through alternative familial branches (Wu 1986, pp. 278–79).

He highlighted the fundamental difference between Catholic and Buddhist celibacy. Following the Western teaching, celibacy is about mastering one’s own desires; extending the Buddhist logic, however, would lead to the extinction of all humanity (Zhang 2019, p. 515).

Building upon Matteo Ricci’s framework, Zhu Zongyuan articulated two primary reasons for clerical celibacy. For priests and clergy, the requirement of celibacy enables undivided devotion to God’s service. The sacred duties of the priesthood demand purity of body and mind, free from worldly distractions. For missionaries, the celibate state grants

freedom to travel widely in spreading the Gospel. Unencumbered by family ties, they regard the whole world as their home, mirroring the historic dedication of Western missionaries whose sacrifices enabled Christianity's global reach. Zhu even adopted Ricci's organic analogy: just as the human body requires different organs for distinct functions, society needs both married believers to continue humanity and celibate evangelists to focus on spiritual work (Zhang 2019, pp. 515–16).

In his work *Responses to a Guest's Questions*, Zhu Zongyuan employed striking botanical imagery to explain the doctrine of original sin. He described how all humanity inherits this spiritual corruption much like a tree whose roots absorb poison that then spreads to every leaf and blossom. This congenital defect stems from divine punishment for Adam's primordial disobedience. While the external act of consuming the forbidden fruit might appear insignificant, its essence constituted the grave offense of trusting the serpent's lies while directly violating God's commandment. Zhu drew parallels to political and familial treason, comparing it to subjects rising against their sovereign or children turning against their parents. He stressed humanity's fundamental inability to achieve self-redemption, characterizing people as the most inferior creatures who had offended the supreme deity, making any human effort insufficient to rectify such cosmic rebellion (Zhang 2019, p. 517–19).

Zhu systematically connected original sin to Christ's incarnation. Precisely because humans cannot self-redeem, God provided atonement (Zhang 2019, p. 519). His exposition of original sin served to demonstrate the necessity of Christ's salvation. Zhu noted that Jesus alone was born of virginity through all ages, dismissing claims of other miraculous conceptions.

Addressing doubts about Christian doctrines, which are the Trinity, crucifixion, resurrection, original sin's transmission, and eschatology, Zhu argued that these mysteries surpass human understanding and rely entirely on Western missionaries' testimony (Zhang 2019, p. 539). His answer invoked moral witness. Western scholars live in lifelong chastity, practicing rigorous self-discipline (Zhang 2019, p. 541).

For Zhu, asceticism became a path to holiness and divine proximity. By shedding the flesh's bondage and desires, humans could return to their purity. Asceticism was viewed as emulating Christ's model of chastity, based on the belief that he maintained a life of celibacy. Clerical chastity upheld the dignity of sacred offices.

5. Conclusions

Michele Ruggieri acknowledged that while ascetic celibacy represented a higher moral path, it was not universally applicable. He upheld religious celibacy as the most secure route to heaven without denying the moral dignity and legitimacy of marital life in secular society. Matteo Ricci devoted significant space in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (Vol. 8) to defending celibacy, while Alfonso Vagnone explicitly positioned celibacy above marriage as a superior spiritual state. Giulio Aleni further supplemented these arguments by framing celibacy through the lenses of original sin and mortality.

Among critics, Buddhism also enforced celibacy, prompting Ricci to emphasize distinctions between Christian and Buddhist practices. The Buddhist monk Zhuhong defended Buddhist celibacy against Ricci's critiques, whereas the Confucian scholar Xu Dashou attacked Catholic celibacy from the perspective of the Five Relationships, arguing it disrupted familial and social order.

Supporters argued that Christian celibacy, in contrast to its Buddhist counterpart, balanced spiritual superiority with social harmony. Yang Tingyun expanded this view in *Distinguishing Clearly Between Christianity and Buddhism*, criticizing Buddhism's universal

demand for celibacy as unrealistic. Zhu Zongyuan similarly justified celibacy through original sin theology.

Prior to the implementation of monogamy in China, while widow chastity was an established tradition, the notions of virginity and male chastity challenged Chinese societal norms. The integration of chastity with self-cultivation, framed as a knowledge of mastering desire, exemplified the interaction between Chinese and Western civilizations.

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Notes

- ¹ (Menegon 2003). Celibacy and virginity are not equated—cf. Jerome and Augustine, who became celibates, but were not virgins.
- ² (Gernet 1985). “Chinese morality and Christian morality”, p. 191.
- ³ These texts were chosen because their works are closely related to this research, or I deem them highly relevant to the study’s narrative.
- ⁴ Regarding the theory of imitation, we can refer to (Hosle 2025).
- ⁵ As detailed below, Xu Dashou criticized Catholicism for elevating the status of women above men. In the 44th year of the Wanli era (1616), Shen Que and others initiated the Nanjing Persecution. The work *Xiushen Xixue* (修身西学) was completed after this persecution and published in 1624. Xu Dashou’s work was finalized around 1623. Here, we speculate that Alfonso Vagnone had already keenly recognized this issue.
- ⁶ According to research by Chen Yuan, Fang Hao, and others, Ricci died in 1610, and *Tianshuo* was completed in 1615, making it unlikely that Ricci directly responded to *Tianshuo*. The text *Fr. Ricci’s Reply to the Great Monk Lianchi’s Four Discourses on Heaven from Bamboo Window in Posthumous Writings on Apologetics* was likely authored by the Catholic community under Ricci’s name. Nicolas Standaert and Sun Shangyang suggest Xu Guangqi as the probable author (see Standaert 1988; Sun 1994).
- ⁷ (see Zhuhong 1996). This section is also included in *Posthumous Writings on Apologetics* (see Ricci 2013).
- ⁸ This can be connected to Yang’s personal conversion experience. Yang has a concubine, who is the mother to his sons. In a private exchange, Yang questioned Li Zhizao on the Jesuits’ inflexibility regarding polygamy, contrasting it with Buddhist leniency. Li’s decisive intervention came when he asserted that Christianity’s unyielding commitment to monogamy set it apart from Buddhism; Christians practice their moral teachings (cf., Liu 2012).

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