

Dissertation Project

Gender and Religion in Cultural Exchange: Norms and Practices of Chinese Christianity, 1583–1724

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Research subject

When the Jesuits arrived in China towards the end of the sixteenth century, they remarked that gender relations there were different from those of their own society. They described the perceived differences in their letters and relations published in Europe, often praising the virtuousness of Chinese women. In local communities however, Chinese gender relations represented a challenge for the Jesuit mission. Missionaries and Chinese Christians faced the question of how Christian and Chinese gender norms and practices could combine. In many cases, the introduction of Christianity led to a negotiation of gender norms between Chinese actors and missionaries. As a result, new gender norms and practices emerged from the situation of cultural exchange which took place in Chinese Christianity during the long seventeenth century.

The project aims at studying these gender norms and practices within the Christian Chinese communities established by Jesuit missionaries during the seventeenth century. Following the approach of recent studies on Chinese Christianity, we treat these communities as local denominations of Christianity. Their norms were established by multi-directional processes of communication; subaltern actors played a major role in shaping their forms of piety and gender norms. Christian Chinese communities constituted spaces of cultural exchange in which gender norms and practices that elsewhere were regarded as normal, were questioned, and therefore articulated.

Main questions

Particularly, the project focuses on processes of adoption and transformation of gender norms and practices within Christian Chinese communities, including as well the instances of resistance against these social changes. With regard to norms, the project relies on the approach of historical discourse analysis: we study how different normative gender discourses coexisted in Chinese Christian communities and how various actors took part in them. In order to shed light on processes and limits of transfer, the project also focuses on translations.

With regard to practices, we apply a sociological understanding: we ask in which social structures Christian Chinese practice was embedded, and what impact gender norms had on the development of these structures. Furthermore, we study how Chinese Christians and Jesuit missionaries were “doing gender” while being involved in a variety of informal and formal (ritualized) religious and communal practices. The project addresses these central questions from the beginning of the Jesuit China mission in 1583 to the proscription of Christianity by the Yongzheng emperor in 1724. In this chronological set-up, we consider different geographical (Jiangnan region and Beijing) and social (rural and urban) contexts.

Sources

Because of Jesuit as well as Chinese documentation of activities, seventeenth-century Chinese Christianity is unique as a particularly well documented case of cultural exchange. This allows the researcher to rely upon a wide range of sources. The latter include published missionary sources in various European languages and in Chinese, archival missionary sources, and published Chinese language sources written by converts, sympathizers, and opponents of the new religion.