

Globethics Repository

The logo consists of the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Gail King, “A Model for all Christian Women” . Candida Xu, a Chinese Christian Woman of the Seventeenth Century, Collectanea Serica, New Series 2, Abingdon, Oxon – New York – Sankt Augustin: Routledge – Monumenta Serica Institute 2021. xv, 162 pp., Illustrations, Bibliography, Index with Glossary. ISBN 978-0-367-68290-3

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository.
More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

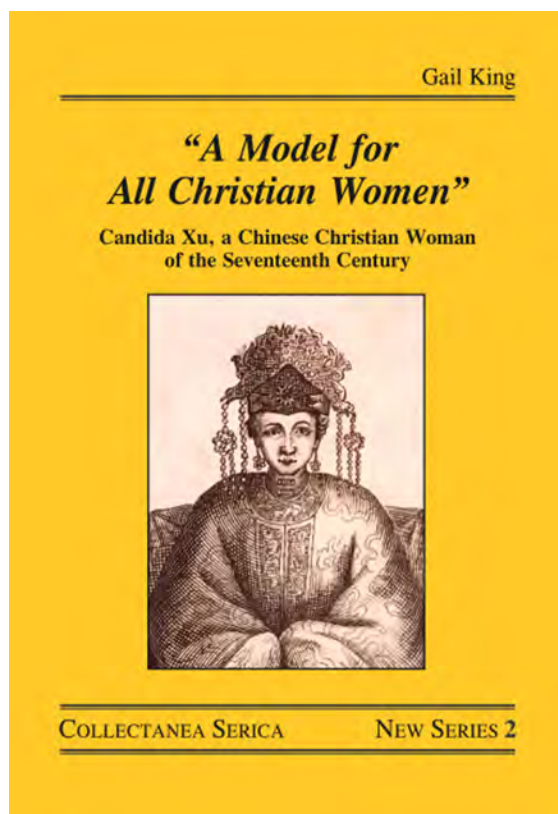
Item Type	Book review
Authors	Leeb, Leopold
Publisher	China-Zentrum e.V.
Rights	China-Zentrum e.V.
Download date	2026-07-14 23:10:39
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4058714

Book Review of:

Gail King, *“A Model for all Christian Women”. Candida Xu, a Chinese Christian Woman of the Seventeenth Century*, Collectanea Serica, New Series 2, Abingdon, Oxon – New York – Sankt Augustin: Routledge – Monumenta Serica Institute 2021. xv, 162 pp., Illustrations, Bibliography, Index with Glossary. ISBN 978-0-367-68290-3

Leopold Leeb

Translated by Jacqueline Mulberge SSpS



Prominent and revered Catholic women of the 17th century are not uncommon in the Philippines, as for instance the foundress of the “Religious of the Virgin Mary,” Venerable Ignacia del Espíritu Santo (1663–1748). In Vietnam, as well, a community of virgins was founded early on, namely the “Amantes de la Croix” (Sisters’ Congregation of the Love for the Holy Cross), which was founded in 1670 by Mgr. Pierre Lambert de la Motte. Very little is known, however, about the first Christian women in Tonkin or Cochinchina. Only tragic women’s fates have come down to us from the early days of Christianity in Korea and Japan, such as that of the Korean woman Julia Ōta (ca. 1560–1612), who was taken to Japan by the Christian Daimyō Konishi Yukinaga in 1592 and converted there, and who

then steadfastly stood up for the faith and was banished to the island of Kōzu-shima for that reason. Or Hosokawa Garasha (1563–1600), who came from a noble family and was married to the Daimyō Hosokawa Tadaoki. She corresponded with the Jesuit Gregorio de Céspedes (1551–1611) and, probably in an emergency situation in order not to fall alive into the hands of the enemies, had herself killed by a servant. There is no shortage of tales

of martyrdom about the hair-raising ordeals of beatified or canonised Japanese women, such as Maria Murayama (c. 1595–1622), Magdalena Kiyota (c. 1580–1627) and Marina Ōmura (c. 1590–1634). So it is good to hear about the only notable Chinese Catholic woman of 17th century China that she was not a tragic martyr figure, nor a nun nor virgin catechist, but a wife and mother of a large family, a businesswoman and very committed social activist, a creatively thinking missionary from the upper class, but still a traditional Chinese woman, a careful guardian of Confucian etiquette and (probably) with small bound “lotus feet.”

With her book “*A Model for all Christian Women*”. *Candida Xu, a Chinese Christian Woman of the Seventeenth Century*, Dr. Gail King has made a unique contribution to the history of Catholic women in East Asia. Candida Xu 徐 (许) 甘第大 (1607–1680), the “*petitte fille du Grand Chancelier de la Chine*,” was the granddaughter of the high state official Xu Guangqi 徐光启 (1562–1633). She lived in a Catholic family in Shanghai and married a civil servant, Xu Yuandu 许远度 (ca. 1600–1653). She followed her husband to Songjiang (roughly 30 km west of Shanghai) and endeavoured to spread the faith in her family and the emerging Christian community in Songjiang. Candida Xu had eight children and was known as the mother of the Mandarin Xu Zuanzeng 许缵曾 (1627–ca. 1696). During her lifetime, the Catholic Church in Jiangnan (the provinces in the region at the lower reaches of the Yangzi River) flourished, due among other things to the founding of lay communities by the Jesuit missionary Francesco Brancati (1607–1671). However, the expulsion of the foreign missionaries in the wake of the “Calendar Case” (1665–1666) already ushered in the long period of underground existence of the Church communities. Candida Xu, who headed a large household and became a widow in 1653, was able to develop remarkable financial power through cotton processing (weaving and embroidery) and trade in textile products, together with her daughters and servants; she used this financial power to carry out her charitable and missionary projects. It is quite amazing that she financed or co-financed the building of more than thirty churches in the lower reaches of the Yangzi River and an additional nine churches in other provinces (Henan, etc.). Apart from that she ensured that Christian oil paintings were imported from Macau, bought or produced liturgical vestments and subsidised the printing of Christian literature. She also urged her son to found an orphanage and was personally concerned for abandoned children and the needs of poor Christians, for some of whom she bought coffins and financed a respectable burial.

Candida Xu (we do not know her full Chinese name, only her Latin baptismal name Candida) had long been a celebrity, mainly because of a booklet, written by the Belgian Jesuit Philippe Couplet, entitled *Histoire d'une dame chrétienne de la Chine* (Paris 1688). That work aroused great interest in Europe and there were soon Spanish (1691), Flemish (1694) and Italian (1694) versions of the book from which Chinese translations were made as well (in the years 1882, 1927 and 1938). As the author notes, this biography by Couplet is unfortunately almost the only source on Candida Xu and because that source at first did not appear in China and in Chinese, Candida remained relatively unknown in China itself for a long time. One could almost call this very limited source situation “precarious”. That is why it is doubly important and commendable that Gail King's study

attempts to embed Couplet's biography in the wider context and to situate the data on Candida's life on a broader basis.

The author of the book, Gail King, gained her doctorate from the University of Chicago in the field of Chinese literature in 1982. For many years she was the "Asian Studies Librarian" at the Harold B. Lee Library of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. As Professor Mungello writes in the Foreword, she dedicated her life's work to Candida Xu and has already written for more than three decades on the family history of the Xu clan. She researched Candida Xu extensively; more than twenty years ago (1998) her truly in-depth analysis "Candida Xu and the Growth of Christianity in Seventeenth Century China" was published in the journal *Monumenta Serica*. The present volume, which was also published by the Monumenta Serica Institute, summarises Gail King's many years of study and includes valuable visual material and appendices, such as parts of the remarkable autobiography of Candida's son Xu Zuanzeng (pp. 115-120) and the English translation of Xu Zuanzeng's biography of his mother, which was only available in a Spanish version (pp. 121-131). The bibliography (pp. 135-153) and the glossary (pp. 155-162) are of considerable help to the academically interested reader.

After a discussion of the two main sources on Candida's life (the biographies of Couplet and Xu Zuanzeng), the author presents the genealogy and family tradition of the Xu. Candida's ancestors probably lived first in Kaifeng, then in Suzhou. It was not until around 1450 that a branch of the Xu family settled in Shanghai. The present work includes old pictures of circular walled Shanghai of the late Ming dynasty and even an old sketch of the Xu family dwelling. Here we also learn that the city district Xujiahui 徐家匯 (formerly mainly known as "Zikawei"), which was the most prominent centre of Catholic life in all of China in the 20th century, belonged originally to the land of the Xu family which was located in the west (rather than "south," as it says on page 38) of the old city. The well-known grandfather of Candida, Xu Guangqi, was baptised in 1603 and converted his old father and the entire family. Thus Candida, born in Shanghai as one of the children of Xu Guangqi's only son, grew up as a Catholic from the beginning.

The author Gail King describes the work of the women in that time and that region: production, processing and marketing of silk and cotton. She gives an insight into the childhood, youth and marriage of the young Candida, where she also addresses the problem of marrying a non-Christian partner at that time. Candida's three sisters, Felicitas, Martina and Monica, were also married to men who were open to Christianity, and so they probably formed the "original Catholic population" of Shanghai. Candida herself bore her husband eight children, including three sons, so it must have been quite painful for her that her Buddhist-oriented husband took a concubine.

In many ways, Candida Xu attempted to reimagine the traditional Confucian female role and to cross certain boundaries. The details taken from her biography are quite concrete and informative. In an environment that placed great store by the strict separation of the sexes, Candida endeavoured to get women and girls in her circle of acquaintances "used" to contact with men (priests), e.g. she sent girls to priests to receive a blessing and in that way prepared them for informal contact with men, which was also important for

Confession (p. 73). It is hardly conceivable to us now, how many Confucian taboos were slowly softened and finally transformed by Christianity.

Gail King's study is up till now certainly the most detailed academic study of Candida Xu and she also attempts to clarify a number of questions, such as: How could a woman become so active and influential in the traditional, male dominated Chinese society? One interesting observation on that is that precisely the Confucian family model played into the hands of the activity drive of the widow Candida, because the tradition required that sons had to obey the mother, and so Candida used the official civil servant status of her son to travel and to realise Church projects. The author argues there that to a certain extent women enjoyed more freedom of movement than men. "[B]ehavioral expectations [...] were not as rigid for women, and the lines of convention were more malleable for them. So long as women stayed in a place of hierarchical subservience, much was possible. Chinese Christian women and Candida Xu benefitted from this" (p. 102). The author also traces how Candida Xu was forgotten during the times of persecution in the 18th century, but became better known again in China from the end of the 19th century through three Chinese translations of Couplet's biography (p. 109).

What the author could perhaps have expanded better is Candida Xu's relationship with other Chinese Christian women of her time. Agatha Tong (Tong Yajiada 佟亚加达), the wife of the Manchu mandarin Tong Guoqi 佟国器, is mentioned twice (p. 71 and p. 80), but she is missing from the index, and it would have been good to say a little more about Agatha Tong or Tong Guoqi, since she was, after all, a comparable Catholic from the nobility. The "Christian women of the Ming Court" are also mentioned on page 71, but for the non-specialist reader, further explanation is needed here, for it is hardly common knowledge who these Christian women were. Wasn't there even the Empress Mother, baptised as "Helena" (Liena 烈纳) in 1648? Agnes Yang (Yang Yinuosi 杨依搦斯), the daughter of Yang Tingyun 杨廷筠, who led a charitably active community of women in Hangzhou, is also not mentioned, which on the other hand is again understandable, since there is much less material on these women than there is on Candida Xu.

One could have described in a little more detail the various lay organisations that existed in the Shanghai region at that time and which were linked above all to the name of the Jesuit Francesco Brancati who was so successful. Fortunato Margiotti OFM has written several articles on that subject (thus for instance "Congregazioni laiche gesuitiche della antica missione cinese," in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 18 [1962]), and although Brancati is mentioned several times, on two pages (pp. 90-91), relatively little is said about those significant lay organisations which Candida Xu so generously supported. King's comments are mainly based on English and Chinese sources, although a few French and German studies are also cited.

Comparison with Japanese Catholic women would certainly also have been very interesting. Although King mentions the work of Haruko Nawata Ward (*Women Religious Leaders in Japan's Christian Century, 1549-1650*, published in 2009) in a footnote on page 71, any further reference to the reality of Christian women in Japan is missing. Especially for the "indirect evangelisation" of women ("[i]ndirect means of sharing the gospel with women", p. 100) many examples can certainly be cited from the early mission to Japan. A

comparison with outstanding women in the church history of Japan (and Vietnam, Korea) would have made Candida Xu's unique profile even more visible.

Candida Xu lived "a life of [...] dedicated intentionality" (p. 104) and thus developed her potential as a "strong woman." The author notes that a number of "strong women" (p. 102) had already proven themselves among her ancestors. However, there is no mention that the Xu family also produced a number of "strong women" in the 19th and 20th centuries. One might have expected at least a reference to Ni Guizhen 倪桂珍 (1869–1931), who came from the Xu family on her mother's side and through marriage with Song Jiashu 宋嘉樹 (Charlie Soong) became the mother of the politically, economically, but also charitably active "Song Sisters" (Song Qingling 宋慶齡, Song Meiling 宋美齡 and Song Ailing 宋蔼齡).

Further desiderata would include other links into the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, where it says that Candida's three sisters Felicitas, Martina and Monica were also married to men sympathetic to Christians, one of whom was from the Ai 艾 family (p. 52), Shanghai Christians will know that the Ai clan was also a well-known Catholic family in the 20th century, which generated several priestly vocations. That and similar connections to the present-day Church in Shanghai could make the book much more interesting to Chinese readers. A footnote on p. 112 mentions that Xu Guangqi of the Shanghai diocese was already declared blessed ("In 2011 the diocese of Shanghai declared the beatification of Xu Guangqi"). That was based on a misunderstanding, however: only the process of beatification was applied for, or the old idea of a possible canonisation from the year 1933 was taken up again. Officially Xu Guangqi has not been declared "blessed" in the Catholic Church. This rather significant, mistaken information shows that the author's direct connection to the current Church in China is fairly weak. Another example: The Jesuit and historian Xu Yunxi 徐允希, a member of the Xu family in Shanghai, is mentioned, to be sure, as the translator of the third Chinese edition of Candida's biography, but the dates of Xu Yunxi's life (1870–1940) are not precisely given in the index, it only states "(fl. 1900–1938)". The fact that Fr. Vincent Lebbe started Catholic Action in Tianjin in 1912 is indeed mentioned, but that the Shanghai entrepreneur Lu Bohong 陆伯鸿 (also known as "Lo Pa Hong", 1875–1937) co-founded a lay group similar to Catholic Action in Shanghai shortly afterwards is not mentioned, although Lu in particular, as a layman and charitably active businessman, would be a good comparison to Candida Xu. What is lacking in the book, therefore, is the comprehensive and deeper connection to more recent times, to the present, to today's Shanghai and Songjiang. It would have been nice if the author had tried to interview a woman from the Xu family in Shanghai or if she had made a trip to Songjiang to enquire about possible local traditions (perhaps in connection with the former tomb of Candida) or to photograph the present-day appearance of the Catholic Church there. However, this would have required not only time and commitment but also a shift in thinking: from a text-based study to field research and oral traditions, from the neatly codified past to the confusing, challenging and often bitter present: is it not bitter that, besides Candida Xu, the great historians and theologians of the Xu family of the 20th century are virtually forgotten in China?

Together with Tang Yaoguang's 唐耀光 doctoral thesis *Theologisches Denken bei Xu Zongze (1886–1947)*, [*Theological Thought in Xu Zongze (1886–1947)*], which was written at the Philosophical-Theological College of the Steyl Missionaries in Sankt Augustin and published by EOS Editions in 2018, Gail King's work is in any case an important building block in the rehabilitation of the other great figures of the Xu family, who unfortunately all too often exist only in the shadow of the (unjustly?) all-superior Xu Guangqi and are consigned to oblivion. It is very much to be hoped that a Chinese version of Gail King's book will soon be published so that non-Christian historians in China can also discover this great and indeed unique Catholic lady of the 17th century and make even more connections to the present day.