

Brahmā's Curse begins with a short preface that declares that “while it is . . . little astounding to learn that Indian philosophers did not make the political and social settings of their times a subject matter of philosophical consideration and debate, it is astounding to observe that Indologists, too, paid very little attention to the societies these philosophers were part of, and to the everyday realities they had to endure in their days” (p. vii). This book seeks—rightly—to correct the latter problem. And yet, in doing so it sometimes too simply defines the problem or monochromatically interprets the evidence (such that, for example, the first part of the statement just cited is given as an uncomplicated fact).

Slaje’s erudition is legendary, and this work offers instructive instances of it—not just for coverage of the items featured in its two chapters, but also his treatment, for example, of types of weapons in Kashmir (p. 20) (which he has handled elsewhere, as well, in greater detail). Yet, brevity renders the work one of too little nuance to avoid the kinds of simplification elsewhere *never* associated with Slaje’s brilliant pen. *Brahmā's Curse* is a useful item, and I am happy to have read it, bound though it is by brevity to at least some inadvertent overgeneralization.

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Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China. By NADINE AMSLER. Seattle: UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS, 2018. Pp. ix + 258. \$95 (cloth); \$30 (paper).

By seeking to fill a gap in scholarship on Chinese Catholics in the seventeenth century, particularly how women in China were introduced to Catholicism and contributed to its development and spread, Nadine Amsler makes crucial contributions to many different fields of study in this slim, tightly organized book. While its primary audience will be those interested in the history of Catholicism in China, reflected in the justly earned laudatory blurbs from such scholars on the jacket, this book ought to be read by anyone interested in women’s devotional lives in the early modern world (not only in China), histories of East–West cultural exchange, and cross-cultural constructions of gender.

Concurrently, one of the key issues at the heart of Amsler’s study is what sources are “suitable” for historians, and how obscured history can be uncovered by means of source materials that, while they might not answer historians’ questions directly, give credible answers nonetheless, if only we know how to listen to them. Such a creative approach, in the hands of a less careful researcher, might lead to disaster. But in Amsler’s meticulous, considerate ones, “reading . . . against the grain” (p. 11) has resulted in a study that allows us real glimpses through the screens that elite women retreated behind when men, including Jesuit missionaries, visited their homes.

Studies of Chinese women’s religious practices in the domestic sphere have been relatively popular in recent scholarship, although these studies generally focus on Buddhist devotional activities and popular religious texts. Now, Amsler’s book provides a point of comparison that brings us a more complete picture of early modern Chinese women and their agency within the social limitations of gender expectations. This is an enormous task, one that requires multiple layers of framing and reframing.

Seventeenth-century Chinese Catholic women left no written records of their own religious experiences (p. 168 n. 43). Consequently, Amsler spends the first four chapters of the book focusing her analysis on the Jesuits themselves and their growing comprehension and re-interpretation of Chinese gender norms—for both men and women—so that we might better grasp the five short case studies of female religious experience that close the book. It is only by unpacking how thoroughly Jesuits in China sought to shape their identities along the lines of Confucian literati elites, and all the etiquette and gendered performances that went along with that, that the pregnancy and childbirth rituals (chap. 5), women’s congregations (chap. 6), family networks of religious women (chap. 7), convent-like homes of chaste widows (chap. 8), and textiles embroidered and donated to churches (chap. 9) are able to show us the central importance of women and their homes in the development of Chinese Catholicism at its earliest stages. In doing so, Amsler’s study joins those she cites on the Americas,

India, and Japan in successfully “salvag[ing] information on female religious lives from predominantly male source records” (p. 155).

Chapter 1 is concerned with the change in Jesuits’ self-presentation from Buddhist to Confucian. Influenced by concerns about the lower social prestige of Buddhist monks in China and the value of their social capital, and in hope of gaining access to elite circles, the adoption of literati habits unintentionally challenged the priests’ own masculinity when Europeans tended to view Chinese men as effeminate. In addition to taking on the costumes, literary sophistication, and curio-filled studies of the literati gentlemen, Jesuits curiously also took advantage of a biological reality—that men of European origin generally can grow more abundant facial hair than men of East Asian origin—to draw on the mystical capital of Daoist long-life cultivation to attract attention to their religious capital as well. Certain aspects of literati masculinity at the cusp of the seventeenth century proved a challenge, especially the acceptance of homoeroticism and male–male romance, and the filial imperative to have a son. Jesuits thus fell under suspicion, culminating not only in accusations that Catholicism was inherently unfilial, but that priests covertly used the access given to them by their status to commit adultery with female converts. Buddhist monks had long been targets of similar accusations, a parallel that suggests changing their clothing, facial hair, and social circles did not successfully mark Jesuit priests as equal to Confucian literati elites. Such ongoing challenges required Jesuits to reject contact with women even more firmly and emphasize homosocial friendships as emotionally fulfilling but never sexual.

In attempting to distance themselves even further from the negative associations of Buddhist monks, mixed sex worship in churches outside the home became unthinkable, as did private audiences between priests and women in the home, a Buddhist practice widely condemned by Confucian moralists. Therefore, chapter 2 addresses how, as Jesuits abandoned their Buddhist garb, they were now expected to scrupulously observe prohibitions on direct contact between men and women, especially in the elite families they hoped to convert. The spatial nature of idealized gender relations, particularly regarding the strict segregation of elite women to domestic spaces within the home, had far reaching implications, particularly since the dominant picture of China many Europeans had was the one created by Jesuits writing home to justify their cautious approach to evangelism. Consequently, idealized images of incorruptibly chaste women and lascivious Buddhist monks dominated European impressions of China for centuries, replicated by Jesuits who took Confucian purists as both social models and sources of ethnographic intelligence. No one, Amsler notes, bothered to go beyond the rarified world of the gentry to publish accounts of how lower-class women lived. Only one account from the seventeenth century, written by a shipwrecked Jesuit who meticulously documented all he saw on his months-long journey through south China, included the vibrant social and religious lives outside the home that many women did enjoy. This work, contradicting uniform descriptions of female seclusion, never received approval for publication.

By committing to gentry ideals, Jesuits in China created a hybridized literati-priestly identity that put them in an untenable position regarding female converts. Chapter 3 describes how, if they wished to reach out to women, they needed to do so largely through intermediaries, primarily male relatives, but also children, servants, and, in the case of imperial palace ladies, eunuchs. In practice, this resulted in significant compromises that curtailed women’s access to religious instruction and worship, including abandoning specific sacramental rites that required direct bodily contact between priest and supplicant, the cause of significant debate between Catholic orders in the latter half of the century. Amsler points out that by requiring permission from and supervision of male family members to meet with women, “Jesuits did not accord to women the right to decide their own religious identity” (p. 49). Even so, against these odds, Chinese Catholic women themselves became the most powerful agents of converting other women. In lieu of church attendance, priests encouraged women to practice piety at home under the leadership of other laywomen where, infrequently, priests might themselves visit to say Mass. For the most part, Chinese Catholic women practiced their devotion independently of direct involvement with church authorities, a stark contrast to the importance of the church and sacraments among European female congregants.

In chapter 4, Amsler engages in a close reading of a household manual, *The Government of the Family in the West*, published in the late 1620s. Interestingly, the composition of such a manual itself

marks another move by Jesuits to assume markers of Chinese literati identity, and its contents reveal much about ongoing negotiations made to justify, modify, and challenge Chinese customs. There was little that could be practically changed about Chinese wedding rituals since the sacrament of matrimony would expose the bride to scrutiny of those beyond her husband's household. Even so, there was significant room for debates among Catholic orders and with Chinese converts over the validity and sanctity of these marriages. The intricacies of these conflicts are impossible to summarize here, but they focused mostly on divorce and polygyny. Significantly, Jesuits called upon the Confucian *Four Books for Women* and the late imperial cult to widow chastity to argue that divorce was anathema to the Chinese and therefore non-sanctified marriages must be treated as insoluble, conveniently sidestepping the distinct lack of prohibitions on widower remarriage in the canon. Polygyny proved more difficult. Jesuit debates on what to do when a man with concubines expressed interest in converting reveal a glaring blind spot—they had no concern for what happened to the repudiated women so long as the elite man, the target of their evangelism, fulfilled their prerequisites for conversion.

The first half of the book establishes a clear case for how Jesuits marginalized women in their efforts to convert gentry men in seventeenth-century China, a difficult situation exacerbated by their zealous adherence to idealized prescriptions for sex segregation that did not represent reality for women outside of elite circles. There were, however, points of contact that allowed women to grasp certain aspects of Catholicism and interpret them within the frameworks of their own domestic religious lives. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which women came to Catholicism through reimagining the Virgin Mary as a son-granting “Holy Mother” in the same vein as widespread late imperial devotion to the Bodhisattva Guanyin. With the Virgin Mary fulfilling Catholic families’ need for a fertility-granting deity (an impression that Jesuits did not oppose, and in some cases emphasized above other facets of Marian devotion), they also advocated St. Ignatius of Loyola, their patron saint, as a great protector of women in childbirth. Anecdotes from annual letters of relief obtained by women who displayed his image in their bedrooms or wore it on their bodies while in labor reveal that this practice spread across Chinese Catholic networks via women who helped each other through childbirth. Catholic “ritual obstetrics” (p. 88) proved an effective means of meeting the religious and bodily needs of Catholic devotees and non-Catholics alike via a diverse network of lay women.

Chapter 6 describes further consequences of sequestering female Catholics from participation in the public life of the church introduced in chapter 3. Focusing on women’s congregations that most often met within the domestic sphere of a particular affluent devotee’s home, or in Holy Mother churches specifically built for women, the parallels between these groups and lay groups of Buddhist women are significant. Incidences of sutra-chanting groups who converted en masse to reciting Catholic prayers and litanies are included in multiple annual letters. In these female dominated spaces, Catholic women who had dwelt on themes popular in texts for lay Buddhists, like accumulation of karma, heavenly retribution, and the blood-pond hell that awaited mothers, were particularly enthusiastic about the sacrament of confession and absolution. Jesuit writings frequently report how faithful women outshone men in the desired frequency and meticulous detail of their confessions. Even so, reluctant to be seen as violating gender norms, Jesuits gave Chinese women few opportunities to participate in communal religion, in the process inadvertently creating powerful female lay leaders with devotional autonomy.

Chapter 7 focuses on how female kinship ties, though challenged by the departure of women from their natal home upon marriage, still contributed to the growth of Catholicism across domestic spaces. Women formed a bridge between families after marriage, challenging the dominant sense that intergenerational Catholicism was due to patrilineal religious education. In the case of the Xu family, not only were Xu daughters allowed to preserve their Catholic identity in their husband’s homes, they also successfully converted members of their new families. Women who married into the Xu household also converted and joined the domestic congregation presided over by Candida Xu. Some of these women then reached out to their natal families and evangelized them, spreading Catholicism through female networks that did not dissolve after marrying into their husbands’ patriline.

Chapter 8 briefly explores the phenomenon of “domestic convents,” spaces where widowed Catholic women could demonstrate their observance of the Confucian value of widow chastity while also maintaining their Catholic piety. Female chastity proved a problem when translating Catholicism into

the Chinese context in the seventeenth century. While Dominicans were committed to defending young women who resisted marriage, Jesuits were reluctant to advocate vows of virginity unless women had the full support of their families or employers. In retelling stories of European saints, Jesuits often revised the backgrounds of consecrated virgins so that they had parental support for their convictions, rather than risking accusations of advocating unfilial behavior. Though Amsler does not make this connection, it occurs to me that examples of popular Buddhist tales of celibate virgins who resisted attempts to defile their chastity, including Bodhisattva Guanyin's incarnation as Princess Miaoshan, may have further contributed to the Jesuits' doubts about promoting this facet of Catholic piety. Instead, in their role as scholar-gentry, the only type of chastity they could wholeheartedly support was for widows.

Amsler's attention to craft as an expression of female devotion in chapter 9 immediately brings to mind parallel work on Chinese Buddhist embroidery by Yuhang Li. Their research can be fruitfully read alongside each other as complementary works on the subject of female religious expression through handiwork in the late Ming and early Qing. Each case study reveals how, in the absence of closely monitored religious education and expression, Chinese women adopted Catholicism within the framework of long-standing lay practices and spread it across networks that Jesuit priests could never access but benefited from nonetheless. Closing her book by examining the wordless creations made by women who pursued piety in the context of restrictions put in place by the very clergy vying for their souls, allows readers to directly confront the real legacy that Catholic women in seventeenth-century China had on the church as a global body.

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Animals through Chinese History: Earliest Times to 1911. Edited by ROEL STERCKX, MARTINA SIEBERT, and DAGMAR SCHÄFER. Cambridge: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019. Pp. xiv + 277. \$105.

Animals constitute an important and ubiquitous, if not always fully recognized, presence in Chinese textual and archaeological sources from a very early date. As early as the Shang period, animals appear in diverse contexts and take on a variety of roles, including beast of burden, object of trade, worship, and/or sacrifice, food source, inspiration for the designs and images enlivening pottery, textiles, paintings, and other artistic products, and literary device or character. The chapters that comprise *Animals through Chinese History: Earliest Times to 1911* center animals in the study of Chinese history, politics, economy, religions, literature, and other fields. In so doing, the volume deepens our understanding of these fields as well as suggesting alternate perspectives or avenues through which to approach textual, visual, and archaeological materials. The collection is an essential resource for scholars interested in human-animal interactions, conceptions of nature in China, and the symbolic and real-life roles played by animals across changing political, historical, and cultural landscapes.

Animals through Chinese History contains twelve chapters and is structured chronologically, with chapters covering the Shang through the contemporary period. The chapters span a wide range of disciplines and topics. Chapters by Adam Schwartz and Roel Sterckx shed new light on attitudes to animals and interactions between animals and humans in the Shang through Han periods. Utilizing excavated materials including bronze vessels and oracle bone inscriptions, Schwartz examines the ways in which Shang royal and elite households planned and prepared animals for use in rituals. The frequent and regular sacrifices that formed an ever-present part of elite Shang life necessitated considerable knowledge of animal husbandry and reproductive cycles. Schwartz analyzes the economy of animal use—which animals could and could not be substituted for each other and under what circumstances substitution was deemed necessary or permissible—and the qualities that were valued in sacrificial animals. Sterckx considers the sacrificial role of animals during the early period from another perspective: the stages of “distancing” through which animals were transformed conceptually from living beings into consum-