

Piotr Adamek<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Religious Studies  
Fu Jen Catholic University (Taiwan)

## The Role of Chinese Family in the Spread of Christianity in the Seventeenth-Century China. The Xu Family of Shanghai as an Example

### [Rola chińskiej rodziny w szerzeniu chrześcijaństwa w XVII-wiecznych Chinach. Rodzina Xu z Szanghaju jako przykład]

**Streszczenie:** Rodzina chińska odegrała zasadniczą rolę w szerzeniu chrześcijaństwa w Chinach w okresie późnej dynastii Ming i wczesnej dynastii Qing (XVII w.). Kontakt pierwszych jezuitów z Chińczykami był zazwyczaj ograniczony do mężczyzn, np. uczonych konfucjańskich. Niektórzy z nich, po przejściu na katolicyzm, nawracali jednak swoje rodziny. Rodziny te stanowiły bardzo ważną podstawę pracy misyjnej: wspierały misjonarzy, organizowały życie religijne Kościoła chińskiego i ewangelizowały swoich sąsiadów. Bez chińskich rodzin misja ta byłaby niemożliwa. Historyczny przegląd roli chińskich rodzin w szerzeniu chrześcijaństwa w Chinach w XVII w. zostanie przedstawiony na przykładzie rodziny Xu z Szanghaju. Wybitny uczyony konfucjański Xu Guangqi mógł – po swoim nawróceniu na chrześcijaństwo – nawrócić także całą swoją rodzinę. Nawrócenie to nie tylko pomogło w ustanowieniu Kościoła katolickiego w Szanghaju, ale było również kluczowe w procesie utrzymania chrześcijaństwa jako „religii rodzinnej”. Na podstawie opublikowanych źródeł przeanalizowano i omówiono wpływ rodziny Xu na Kościół katolicki w Chinach.

**Summary:** Chinese family played a fundamental role in the spreading of Christianity in China during the Late Ming and Early Qing dynasty (17 century). The contact of the first Jesuit missionaries with Chinese people was usually limited to men, as e.g. Confucian scholars. Some of them, however, converted their families after they became Catholic. These families were a very important basis for the missionary work: they supported missionaries, organized the religious life of the Chinese Church, and evangelized their neighbors. Without Chinese families the Chinese mission would be virtually impossible. A historical review of the role of Chinese family in the spread of

---

<sup>1</sup> Piotr Adamek, Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University (Taiwan), No. 510號, Zhongzheng Rd, Xinzhuang District, New Taipei City, Taiwan 242, piotradamek@hotmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2759-7858>.

Christianity in China in 17th Century will be presented on the example of the Xu Family from Shanghai. The eminent Confucian scholar Xu Guangqi could – after his conversion to Christianity – convert also his whole family. This conversion helped not only to establish Catholic Church in Shanghai but was also crucial in the process of maintaining Christianity as a “family religion.” Based on published sources, the impact of Xu family on the Catholic Church in China will be analyzed and discussed.

**Słowa kluczowe:** chrześcijaństwo w Chinach w XVII w.; rodzina chińska; Xu Guangqi; Candida Xu; jezuitci.

**Keywords:** Christianity in China in 17th Century; Chinese Family; Xu Guangqi; Candida Xu; Jesuits.

## Introduction

The importance of the Chinese family in the Christianization of China cannot be overestimated. Although Christianity was brought to China by missionaries from abroad, the fact that the Chinese accepted it as their own is related to the conversion of single people and the promotion of the Christian faith within Chinese families and by Chinese families. Nevertheless, until now, most Western publications on missions in the Middle Kingdom focus mainly on the work of foreign missionaries,<sup>2</sup> such as the Jesuits Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇, 1552–1610)<sup>3</sup> or Michael Boym (1614–1659),<sup>4</sup> often ignoring the role of the Chinese in the evangelization of the country, without whom the mission would not be possible. In recent years, however, there have been publications analyzing the importance of the local Chinese community in the evangelization, as well as examining the contribution of single individuals. Scholars such as Gail King<sup>5</sup> or Shi Xijuan<sup>6</sup> reflected the important role that several Chinese families played in the spread of Christianity in China in the 17th century, especially the Xu 徐 family from Shanghai, presented in this paper. The topic will be presented in four parts: in the first one, the process of conversion to Christianity by Paul Xu Guangqi 徐光啓 (1562–1633) and his family in Shanghai will be discussed. In the second part, the impact of the Xu family on the evangelization of the entire region will be presented. Subsequently, the outstanding role played by the granddaughter of Paul Xu Guangqi – Candida Xu – and her relatives will be reflected in the missionary work in China. Finally, in the last concluding

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dunne, 2010; Latourette 1929.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Cronin, 1955.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Kajdański, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> King 1998; King, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Shi Xijuan 2015.

section, the importance of the Xu family to the history of the Church in China will be briefly emphasized.

## 1. The Conversion to Christianity by Paul Xu Guangqi and his Family in Shanghai

Christian missionaries from Persia reached the Middle Kingdom as early as in the 7th century.<sup>7</sup> In the 13th century, Catholic Franciscans worked in China.<sup>8</sup> However, after the fall of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty in the 14th century, Christianity in China disappeared. When Matteo Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries arrived in Macao at the end of the 16th century, they had to begin once more. For the first 20 years, their efforts had little success and brought only single conversions. The Chinese did not accept the “foreign monks.” The change came as the Jesuits put on a Confucian dress and turned to the intellectual and political elite of the country. Because of their European education, not only in theology, but also, for example, in astronomy, they quickly aroused the interest of Chinese scholars, and their openness for the Chinese culture and for Confucian values, as well as the acceptance of rituals in honor of their ancestors and in honor of Confucius, became the basis of dialogue and, sometimes, friendship. Some Chinese scholars, usually after years of contacts with missionaries, accepted Christianity, starting the long process of its inculturation in the Middle Kingdom.

One of them was a Chinese scholar Xu Guangqi 徐光啓, born in 1562 in Shanghai.<sup>9</sup> In his own family he learned the importance of science and spirituality. Xu Guangqi himself quickly climbed in the scholarly career and passed subsequent state exams, eventually becoming the minister of ritual and the grand secretary – *de facto* the prime minister of the state.<sup>10</sup> He also became an outstanding Confucian scholar writing works on astronomy, agronomy and religion. At the age of 33, being still a teacher in Shaozhou 韶州 (today Shaoguan 韶關), Guangdong Province, he met the Italian Jesuit Father Lazzaro Cattaneo and developed an interest in Western science and... Christianity. Five years later, in Nanjing, he met another Jesuit Matteo Ricci, and they became good friends.<sup>11</sup> Soon after,

<sup>7</sup> For more about so called „Nestorian” Church of the East in China or *jingjiao* 景教, see Malek et al., 2006; Standaert, 2001, p. 1–42.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Standaert, 2001, 43–111.

<sup>9</sup> About Xu Guangqi see Jami et al., 2001; Sievernich 2012, p. 111–118; Wu Hsin-fang, 2018, 437–464; Hummel, 1964, Vol. 1, p. 316–319.

<sup>10</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 203; Sievernich, 2012, p. 113–114.

<sup>11</sup> Sievernich, 2012, p. 115.

Xu Guangqi had a dream. He was praying in a temple with three chapels: in one there was a statue of God the Father, in the other – God the Son, the third chapel was empty. Xu Guangqi interpreted this dream as a kind of divine revelation.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, after many conversations, meditations, and an overnight reading of the catechism, Xu Guangqi at the age of 41 (in January 1603) was baptized ending his long intellectual conversion process to Christianity. He was baptized with the name Paul.

The conversion of Paul Xu Guangqi<sup>13</sup> initiated the Christianization of his surroundings. He himself immediately began to evangelize, first of all to his family. Because of his zeal, testimony, and prayer, virtually his whole family, including his father Xu Sicheng 徐思誠,<sup>14</sup> his wife, children, nine grandchildren, and distant relatives (50 people in total), was baptized within a few years, and Shanghai became an important missionary center, laying a solid foundation for the development of Christianity in China that has endured for centuries.

The conversion of Paul Xu Guangqi's wife, who enthusiastically participated in services and promoted Christianity, especially among other women, had a great impact on the entire family and surroundings.<sup>15</sup> As known, in the Chinese Confucian culture, contacts between men, including missionaries, with women were very limited<sup>16</sup> and the direct evangelization by missionaries was practically impossible.

## 2. The Impact of the Xu Family on the Evangelization of the Region

In the evangelization, Paul Xu Guangqi did not stop within his own family, but officially confessed his faith and encouraged other Chinese scholars to convert, pointing out that Christianity does not contradict the Chinese view of the world, but completes and perfects it. His own testimony of Christian life led to numerous conversions. According to Shi Xijuan, the reputation and authority that Paul Xu Guangqi had in the local community played a key role in the rapid spread of Christianity in Shanghai in the first half of the 17th century,<sup>17</sup> earning him the nickname of one of the “three pillars of Christianity in China.”<sup>18</sup> Even after he had

<sup>12</sup> Sievernich 2012, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> For more about the conversion of Xu Guangqi, see Standaert, 2001, p. 407.

<sup>14</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 200.

<sup>15</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> Standaert, 2001, p. 395.

<sup>17</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> Standaert, 2001, p. 405.

achieved the highest positions in the state, he still talked to simple people<sup>19</sup> and publicly announced that everyone who believed in God was his friend, his family. He also promoted relations between missionaries and Chinese officials,<sup>20</sup> and because of that the missionaries could contact the Chinese elite, including the imperial court in Beijing, and he protected also missionaries and Christians from persecution.<sup>21</sup>

Without this patronage of Paul Xu Guangqi, the work of missionaries in China would be very limited, perhaps even impossible, the patronage was continued after his death in 1633 by his family.<sup>22</sup> Paul's son, Jakob Xu Ji 徐驥, provided the missionaries with comprehensive support. He arranged public sermons of missionaries and also, he himself evangelized his many friends. According to the testimony of the French Jesuit Philippe Couplet (1623–1693), thousands of people in the region converted to Christianity every year when Jacob Xu Ji translated the homilies. Because of the support of his family already in 1665, the number of Christians in Songjiang 松江 Prefecture (around today's Shanghai) exceeded to 50,000, and 66 churches were built in nearby towns and villages.<sup>23</sup> When a few years later in Beijing, the Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1591–1666)<sup>24</sup> was sentenced to death and most of the missionaries were expelled from China for several years, the young Church in the Shanghai region not only survived but continued to develop. It is known that in the absence of missionaries, in the that time relatively small city of Shanghai alone, more than a thousand people were baptized.<sup>25</sup>

The four daughters of Jakob Xu Ji played a special role in the evangelization of the region. Due to the high social status and respect of the Xu family, all four women married scholars from the most important families of Songjiang Prefecture and transferred the Christian faith to their husbands and their families.<sup>26</sup> For example, the first daughter, Felicita Xu, was married to Ai Yuanhuai. Soon both her husband and his mother, who were formerly Buddhists, converted to Christianity, and the whole Ai family became one of the most known Catholic families in the region for centuries.<sup>27</sup> Besides, the Christian example of the four daughters of the

<sup>19</sup> Sievernich, 2012, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 203.

<sup>21</sup> Sievernich, 2012, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Standaert, 2001, p. 428. Two other „pillars” were Leo Li Zhizao (1565–1630) and Michael Yang Tingyun (1562–1627), see Sievernich 2012, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> For more about Johann Adam Schall von Bell, see Malek, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Rougemont, 1999, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 201.

<sup>27</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 201, 205.

Xu family became a kind of model for many other women. It was a kind of turning point in the Christianization of the region, and because of that Christianity became widely accepted in the local society and went beyond the limits of one family.

### 3. The Role of the Granddaughter of Paul Xu Guangqi – Candida Xu and her Relatives

One of the four daughters – Candida Xu (1607–1680) – deserves special attention.<sup>28</sup> Among Chinese Catholics, she is still called the “apostle of China” and the “mother of Chinese Christianity” because of her immense importance for the mission in the Middle Kingdom and her support for the young Chinese Church. Catholic missionaries called her “the role model of the Christian woman”<sup>29</sup> because of her pious life and the impact she had on thousands of Chinese women in the seventeenth century. Baptized as an infant in 1607, Candida Xu was growing up in a Catholic family.<sup>30</sup> Parents who recently converted to Christianity zealously prayed with their children and practiced works of charity. Candida’s grandfather, Paul Xu Guangqi, also paid a particular attention to the spiritual development of his grandchildren.<sup>31</sup> Candida – possibly learning with her brothers – received a basic education. In 1624, she married the scholar Xu Yuandu 許遠度, who was a Buddhist. During nearly thirty years of marriage, Candida cared for harmony in the family, combining prayer and work, and raising eight children in the Christian spirit.<sup>32</sup> Later her husband himself was baptized.<sup>33</sup>

After the death of her husband, at the age of 46, Candida Xu decided to devote her life to the service of God and the Church<sup>34</sup> and began to support Christian missions in various ways, using her social status, wealth, and the authority as a mother in the family. For 25 years she supported – materially and immaterially – virtually all Jesuit missionaries in China, who for several years were completely cut off from the European support.<sup>35</sup> She helped also to construct several dozen churches

<sup>28</sup> Her first biography was published by Philippe Couplet (Couplet, 1688); the newest and most extensive one by Gail King (King 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Standaert, 2001, p. 394; King, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> King, 2019, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> King, 2019, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> King, 1998, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> Shi Xijuan, 2015, p. 202.

<sup>34</sup> King, 1998, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> King, 1998, p. 57.

in various parts of China. She personally accompanied her son, who became the administrator of the Jiangxi province, on his travels to Sichuan or Nanchang. She was interested in the situation of Christians there and helped them.<sup>36</sup> Candida Xu also became involved (in the seventeenth century!) in publishing and printing religious books, which she then presented to her many friends, as an important tool for evangelization.<sup>37</sup> Her another mission was the charity work. She generously supported all people in need and founded orphanages.<sup>38</sup> Interesting enough, her many projects were financed with her own work, e.g. she run a weaving workshop with a group of women.<sup>39</sup>

For Candida Xu the most important was her faith she received from her family. Therefore, she also paid a special attention to the prayer and spiritual life of recently established Christian communities. Since in the traditional Chinese society (including the church) women were separated from men, Candida, after talking to missionaries, founded a special Sisterhood of the Mother of God, meeting for prayer and catechesis. She also supported a group of young women who decided to devote their lives to serving the sick and the poor, and for the evangelization.<sup>40</sup> They became the basis of the later Chinese consecrated virgins,<sup>41</sup> who helped the Church in China survived the greatest persecution in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

## Conclusion

### The Importance of Chinese Family in the Spread of Christianity in China

It is because of local Chinese families such as the Xu family from Shanghai, that the Christianity, brought to China by foreign missionaries in the late 16th century, managed to take roots in the Middle Kingdom in the Seventeenth-Century China and then resist persecution in the following century. We could distinguish at least four roles the Chinese family had in this process of evangelization:

– the Chinese family was the main recipient of the Good News. Even if first converts by Jesuit missionaries were concrete Chinese individuals,

---

<sup>36</sup> King, 1998, p. 58–59.

<sup>37</sup> King, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> Until now many Catholic social projects in China, doing caritative work, have Paul Xu Guangqi and Candida Xu as their patron saints, cf. Pan 2010, p. 43–47.

<sup>39</sup> King, 1998, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> King, 1998, p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> For more about Chinese Catholic virgins, see Kang Zhijie, 2019.

as e.g. Confucian scholars, the main and broad process of evangelization was held within (their) multigenerational families, sometimes extended to include neighbors, who in turn evangelized their own families. Jesuit missionaries gave the first impuls and succeeded in their missionary work, because of their openness for Confucian values. However, the maybe most important mission was made later in the families, multiplying significantly the number of converts and strengthening the Christian faith.

– The Chinese family became also the center of the missionary work in China. After the members of one family converted to Christianity, they did not distance themselves from another „infidel” Chinese, but started to actively evangelize their neighbors and friends. They promoted Christian faith with their life, using familiar language dialect and naturally involving the local Chinese culture. In such a way they encouraged numerous subsequent families to become Christian. The sudden grow of Christian communities in the 17 century e.g. near Shanghai, would not happen without the activity of Chinese families there. Especially the missionary role of women in the Chinese communities cannot be overestimated, doing mission among other women practically isolated from male missionaries.

– Chinese family can be also seen as an important protector of the Christian faith. Missionaries, preaching the Gospel, were supported mainly in concrete families. It was especially vital during difficult time, as persecutions, lack of funds, or lack of understanding by Chinese officials. Chinese families were also an important support for other Chinese believers, helping the young Catholic Church to grow. It can be noticed that especially families, cultivating the faith as one community, survived the subsequent „lean years” for the Christianity in China.

– Finally, the Catholic Chinese family became also a kind of „a model” for other families. The Christianity became attractive for many Chinese, because they not only could hear new theoretical foreign concepts, but they could also see the real positive example of Christian life within a family and a community. In a special way – but not only – this model role seems to be significant for Chinese women in the process of conversion and acceptance in the local society.

Because of these diverse roles of the Catholic Chinese family in the Seventeenth-Century China, the Christianity in China in this first period is sometimes directly called “a family religion.”<sup>42</sup> It is true, because there were families, such as the Shanghai Xu family, which – supported by missionaries – played a key role in the development of the Church. The

---

<sup>42</sup> Zhang Qiong, 2019, p. 723.



personal conversion of Paul Xu Guangqi, the baptism of his entire family, and finally the Christian life and missionary activity of Candida Xu became milestones in the process of Christianization and inculturation of Christianity in the Middle Kingdom. Without the active support of the Chinese family, this evangelization, as have been seen in 17th century China, would simply be impossible.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cronin Vincent, 1955, *The Wise Man from the West: Matteo Ricci and his Mission to China*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London.
- Couplet Philippe, 1688, *Histoire d'une dame chrétienne de la Chine*, Michallet, Paris.
- Dunne George H., 2010, *Generation of giants: The story of the Jesuits in China in the last decades of the Ming Dynasty*, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish.
- Hummel Arthur W. (ed.), 1964, *Eminent Chinese of the Qing Period*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington.
- Jami Catherine et al. (ed.), 2001, *Statecraft and Intellectual Renewal in Late Ming China. The Cross-Cultural Synthesis of Xu Guangqi (1562–1633)*, Brill, Leiden.
- Kajdański Edward, 1999, *Michał Boym – Ambasador Państwa Środka*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa.
- Kang Zhijie, 2019, *They Are Brilliant Lilies: Special Characteristics of the Work of Chinese Catholic Virgins*, in: Piotr Adamek, Sonja Huang Mei Ting, *The contribution of Chinese women to the Church: Proceedings of the conference "I have called you by name", September 25–26, 2014, Sankt Augustin (Germany)*, p. 119–143.
- King Gail, 1998, *Candida Xu and the Growth of Christianity in China in the Seventeenth Century*, Monumenta Serica Vol. 46: 49–66.
- King Gail, 2019, *Candida Xu (1607–1680), Chinese Christian woman of faith*, in: Piotr Adamek, Sonja Huang Mei Ting, *The contribution of Chinese women to the Church: Proceedings of the conference "I have called you by name," September 25–26, 2014, Sankt Augustin (Germany)*, p. 31–45.
- King Gail, 2021, "A Model for All Christian Women". *Candida Xu, a Chinese Christian Woman of the Seventeenth Century*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Latourette Kenneth Scott, 1929, *A history of Christian missions in China*, The Macmillan Company, New York.
- Malek Roman (ed.), 1998, *Western Learning and Christianity in China. The Contribution and Impact of Johann Adam Schall von Bell, S.J. (1592–1666)*, Monumenta Serica, Sankt Augustin.
- Malek, Roman, and Peter L. Hofrichter (ed.), 2006, *The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, Monumenta Serica, Sankt Augustin.
- Pan Mary, 2010, *Das Guangqi-Sozialzentrum der Diözese Shanghai*, China heute, No. 1 (165), p. 45–47.
- Rougemont François de, 1999, *Missionary in Ch'ang-Shu (Chiang-Nan): A Study of the Account Book (1674–1676) and the Elogium*, Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- Shi Xijuan, 2015, *Christian Scholar Xu Guangqi and the Spread of Catholicism in Shanghai*, Asian Culture and History, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 199–209.

- Sievernich Michael, 2012, *Der Gelehrte und Staatsmann Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) und die Chinamission der Jesuiten*, *China heute*, No. 2 (174), p. 111–118.
- Standaert Nicolas (ed.), 2001, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, Vol. I: 635–1800, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln.
- Wu Hsin-fang, 2018, *Commemorating Xu Guangqi in 19th- and 20th Century Shanghai*, *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 66, No. 2, p. 437–464.
- Zhang Qiong, 2019, *Nadine Amsler. Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China* (Book Review), *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, No. 6, 719–724.