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Light a Candle
Encounters and Friendship
with China
Festschrift in Honour
of Angelo S. Lazzarotto P.I.M.E.

Edited by
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and
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MEMENTO MORI
PREPARING FOR DEATH IN CHINA AND EUROPE
DURING THE EARLY MODERN ERA

EUGENIO MENEGON

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MEMENTO MORI
PREPARING FOR DEATH IN CHINA AND EUROPE
DURING THE EARLY MODERN ERA

EUGENIO MENEGON

The search for salvation was a common urge in China and the West during early modern times. When Ricci and the Jesuits reached China in the late sixteenth century, they found an intellectual and spiritual environment that was not only open to Western natural philosophy, but also to European moral and religious teachings to attain salvation. Chinese intellectuals and common people, in particular, shared with their Western counterpart a pre-occupation with the meaning of life and death, and one's destiny in the afterlife, framed by the limited life expectancy of pre-modern societies, and nurtured by centuries of philosophical reflection and religious practice within Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism.

While most scholarship on death in China has been overwhelmingly interested in post-mortem rituals developed to dispose of the deceased body and aid the survival of the soul or vital energy (including burial rites; ancestral cults; exorcism of spirits; supernatural journeys to hell, and the like), much less attention has been spent on the preparations for death. Catholic missionaries introduced into China, through their Chinese-language translations, the *ars moriendi* tradition of European humanism perfected by Erasmus and codified by Bellarmino. They often competed with, and attacked, existing Buddhist and Daoist traditions, while attempting to maintain a shaky alliance with Confucianism. This paper will briefly explore how Greco-Roman and Christian ideas and iconography about death, preparing for death, and the afterlife, as presented by the missionaries, interacted with existing Chinese traditions.

Through a brief examination of the *ars moriendi* tradition in Chinese-Western relations, this paper suggests that the central concern for salvation remained the basic objective of the Jesuits in China, even when expressed in moral, rather than religious terms, and that in fact such concern was shared by many of the missionaries' interlocutors at all levels of Chinese society. Death, a problem confronting all human beings regardless of their status and beliefs, was perhaps the ultimate ground of encounter and contestation between East and West.*

* I would like to thank Ad Dudink, Nicolas Standaert, Li Wai-ye, Wilt Idema, Peng

Death Reaches Everywhere

Alas! In the bustle of the world, years go by and quickly reach an end, marching on our lives. The silver face of the moon changes every month. But the rosy softness of spring flowers withers from morning to evening!

No matter what your beauty, you cannot avoid wrinkles, nor stop hair from becoming white. When old age and decrepitude arrive, they rapidly summon the lethal night upon you, and you close your eyes in death.

Death reaches everywhere, does not fear royal palaces, does not shirk the houses of the poor. Rich and poor, cultured and ignorant, all are conducted along the tenebrous way. Burial under three feet of dirt, that awaits me as well as the royal prince!

Why expend so many efforts to shelter from the heat of summer? Why take so many pains to avoid the inconveniences of the autumn wind? Soon you will have to separate yourself forever from your wife, your relatives, and your friends.

If you have a beautiful house, decorated with precious things, maybe someone else will come and live in it. Is there anything you do not love about it?

However, none of the numerous trees in your garden, except for the pine and the catalpa, will survive after the funeral of the master. All the riches you have accumulated with so much effort day after day will be enjoyed by your descendants, and squandered at once.¹

In the spring of 1601, Matteo Ricci, then residing in the imperial capital Beijing, composed this rhythmic text on the brevity of life to accompany Western-style music in the imperial palace, together with other seven others on related topics. In Ricci's words, these "eight short compositions in Chinese characters regarding eight moral topics, full of beautiful sentences of our authors," were written to "exhort to pursue virtue and to lead a good life."² The songs were well received by literati, who started copying and

Guoxiang 彭國翔 and James Robson for their suggestions in the writing of this essay. I am most grateful to the Cini Foundation (Venice, Italy) and the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University (Cambridge, USA) for the occasions they gave me to present this research at their venues.

¹ This is the eighth song in the collection *Xiqin quyi ba zhang* 西琴曲意八章 (Eight songs for the Western *qin*), see Zhu 2001, 290-291; an Italian translation in D'Elia 1955, 14. Ricci translated the Chinese title of the collection as "Canzone [sic] del manicordio di Europa voltate in lettera Chinese," see *FR*, vol. 2, no. 601, 134.

² *FR*, vol. 2, no. 601, 134-135. Earlier that year, Ricci had delivered to the palace a series of gifts for the emperor, including a *manicordio*, a primitive version of the harpsichord. Diego de Pantoja was entrusted by imperial order with the tuning and repairs of the exotic instrument, and with the musical instruction of the palace

spreading them in their circles in the capital. The most acute among these literati observed that through this "artificio" the Jesuits had attempted to teach the emperor how to rule wisely and to live virtuously.³

These moral themes connected to the passing of time, the brevity of life, death, and the fate of humans in the afterlife had been carefully chosen by Ricci for discussion with his literati audience. Ricci's emphasis on these themes can be most clearly seen in his book *Jiren shipian* 畸人十篇 (*Ten Chapters of an Extraordinary Man*), a collection of moral teachings published in the form of dialogues in the capital in 1608. This book was partly derived from Ricci's famous earlier treatise *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, first edition Beijing, 1603), but also represented a rather faithful testimony of conversations with contemporary men of letters between 1595 and 1601, mainly in Beijing, and reflected to a certain extent the literati's interest for, and surprise at, some themes of Christian moral life presented by the foreign priest through aphorisms.⁴

In particular, the *Jiren shipian* represented a purposeful effort to highlight themes connected to matters of life, death, and salvation: the misery of human life as compared with the bliss of the celestial kingdom; the necessary retribution for one's sins in paradise and hell; the fact that responsibility for our actions, including our sins, is with us, and not with fate, as embodied by fortune-tellers; the notion that wealth and its by-product, avarice, are major obstacles to salvation; the need to prize time and prepare for death; and finally, the methods to reach salvation through a virtuous life, i.e., meditation about death, examination of conscience, and penance (in particular, fasting). The insistence on these themes reflected the moral priorities and soteriological conceptions of Christianity in general and of early

eunuchs. The eunuchs soon requested Western-style songs in order to accompany the foreign tunes taught by Pantoja. Ricci thus set to work and produced his modest collection, which may have been a free translation of Italian originals.

³ *FR*, vol. 2, no. 601, 135.

⁴ On the overlaps between the two books, see Lin 1978. Ricci indicated that his compilation was not so much inspired by the paradoxes of ancient philosophers, but rather by the Christian tradition, incorporating also classical wisdom. As Ricci reported to General Acquaviva in a letter dated August 22, 1608, the book was a compilation of the sayings of "Western sages" of all epochs, "those that I could remember with the help of the few books that we have here"; Tacchi Venturi 1911-1913, vol. 2, 362. In Ricci's own estimation, the *Ten Chapters* were a great editorial success: "Among all the books we have composed so far ... none has been more accepted than the recently printed *Paradoxes* in ten chapters with appendixes. [...] We already know that it has been reprinted in two or three other provinces, and from many places they ask us for copies, and thus we have already handed out a few hundreds of them." See Tacchi Venturi 1911-1913, vol. 2, 361-362.

modern Catholicism in particular. On the theme of death, Ricci was rather explicit and gloomy in his famous treatise *Tianzhu shiyi*:

During his lifetime man mostly experiences grief; and at the very end of his life there comes the greatest grief of all: his own death. [...] We do not live, but are in a constant state of death. The moment man is born into the world he begins to die. What we commonly call death is therefore the end of the process of dying. Every day that passes means a loss of a day for me and a step in the direction of the grave.⁵

Ricci went on to express the idea that the world was a temporary abode:

The Lord of Heaven has placed man in this world to test him and to determine the level of his conduct. Thus, the present world is our place of sojourn and not a place of continued residence. Our home is not in this world, but in the life to come; not among men, but in Heaven.⁶

Ricci was conscious that this position would immediately associate him, in the mind of Confucians, with the Buddhists who believed in paradise and hell. He thus proceeded to distance himself from them, saying "Sakyamuni borrowed the doctrines concerning the Lord of Heaven, paradise, and hell [from us], in order to promote his private views and heterodox teachings."⁷ In general, while attacking frontally Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion, the Jesuits also attempted to forge an alliance with certain intellectual strains of Confucianism (especially with scholarship interested in practical studies and a return to antiquity). But even within the Confucian camp, the Jesuits rejected Song and Ming Neo-Confucian ideas that they considered spurious, atheistic, and at variance both with Catholic theology and with what they believed were the classical ideas of Confucius and his followers up to the Han period. Both in the *Ten Chapters* and in *The True Meaning*, therefore, Ricci not only expressed criticism of the Buddhist understanding of life, death, and salvation, but he also attacked the disinterest for the afterlife among contemporary Confucian literati, and their emphasis on the acquisition of merits in this life through the moral accounting of texts known at the time as "ledgers of merit and demerit."⁸ These attacks, repeated by following generations of Jesuits, reveal that the Christian discourse of life and death was competing with other existing discourses, whose elaborate

⁵ Ricci 1985, 137; cf. also *TXCH*, vol. 1, 131, 141.

⁶ Ricci 1985, 142-143.

⁷ Ricci 1985, 143.

⁸ See the extensive discussion on afterlife in *The True Meaning*, chapter 6 (Ricci 1985, 284-345); on the "ledgers," see Brokaw 1991; for a concise and enlightening treatment of "Death and the Hereafter" in late Ming Christianity, see Zürcher 2007, 136-142.

philosophical, moral, and soteriological reflection on such momentous matters long pre-dated the arrival of Catholic moral teachings and conceptions about salvation.

In spite of these attacks, some aspects of the Christian discourse on life and death clearly resonated with existing Chinese traditions, and found a particularly fertile ground during the late Ming period and the war-torn transition into the new Qing dynasty in the 1640s, a time characterized by intellectual and social anxiety, and by a search for answers to the moral conundrums of an age of increasing commercialization and strife.

An examination of ideas, images, and debates surrounding the meaning of life and of approaching death in the late Ming and early Qing periods reveals that several religious and philosophical traditions had since long grappled with the issue, and that the urgency of this problematique was felt more strongly than ever, particularly at that historical juncture. In this essay, I will not deal with the rituals and ideas surrounding those who had already passed away, and who were considered ancestors, spirits or ghosts. So far, in fact, most scholarship has focused on funerary ceremonies, ancestral rites, and rituals of exorcism of the dead, but relatively little has been written on preparing for death in China. Chinese Christian materials belonging to the *ars moriendi* tradition, when seen in comparative perspective with the Chinese traditions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism, offer us a window into this neglected topic, in a special moment of Chinese late imperial history when soul-searching on mortality seems to have remarkably intensified.

Buddhism

The preoccupation with salvation and the meaning of death has been one of the core elements of Buddhism since its inception in India. Through spiritual attainment and specific meditational and ritual practices to prepare for physical death, an adept could possibly hope for Buddhist salvation, that is liberation from the wheel of reincarnation (*samsāra*), and, depending on the Buddhist school, aim at reaching *nirvāṇa* or at least being reborn in a celestial land of bliss, as in the Pure Land tradition widely diffused in China. Meditation over images of death or actual corpses was one of the techniques employed to approach *nirvāṇa*, especially among monks and nuns. In hagiographies of exemplary Buddhists in several Asian countries, starting with the Buddha himself, the encounter with death was depicted as an occasion for awakening. "Death meditations" became part of clerical routine, as ways to undercut worldly attachments, urge zeal in practice, and prepare for one's end. Techniques spanned from reflection on the inevitability of death and the vanity of life, to psychological simulations of the process of bodily

decomposition (as in the Tibetan tradition). In particular, the death of an enlightened master was seen as a transformation that crowned one's spiritual attainment. Thus, exiting from the world was seen not as "death" but rather as its conquest. The word "death" was in fact avoided in these cases, and substituted by terms indicating an escape from the cycle of rebirth, including expressions like "nirvāṇa without remainder" or "going to the pure land." In East Asia, the popular idea that selected individuals would be reborn as *bodhisattva*, powerful beings intent on saving the unenlightened, further marginalized death as a central concern in doctrinal discourse.⁹

Nevertheless, the moment of death exuded a special ritual and meditative power. The meditative powers of the individual, or the ritual performed on his or her behalf at that juncture, yielded a stronger salvific energy than normal merit accumulation through recitations and prayer could obtain. As Jacqueline Stone puts it,

Buddhists hope to die well, not only to appropriate mimetically the ideal death that is the sure sign of an awakened person ... but because the liminality of death itself is thought to offer an unparalleled opportunity for liberation.¹⁰

Deathbed practices were particularly developed in the East Asian Pure Land traditions. The dying could attempt to visualize the Buddha Amitabha and focus their last thoughts on him, a process that would eradicate sins and achieve rebirth in Amitabha's pure land.

Eminent masters, in particular, died in very public fashion. Their last moments, accompanied by meditation and regulated by specific bodily postures described in monastic rules, were witnessed by numerous disciples. The exemplary serenity and composure these masters displayed at death was later recorded in hagiographies circulated after their death. A striking photographic record of the serene death of the Republican-era master Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942) from Quanzhou 泉州, Fujian 福建, illustrates the survival into modern times of these ancient practices, dating at least to the Tang period, and still occasionally followed in China and Taiwan.¹¹

Preparations for death included in the medieval period also a distinct Buddhist literary genre, poetic "spiritual testaments" composed by eminent masters in China. This versification found inspiration in pre-existing poetic traditions of the Chinese literati, the so-called "poems written when approach-

⁹ For a general treatment of death in the Buddhist tradition, see Stone 2005.

¹⁰ Stone 2005, 61.

¹¹ For a description of the deathbed protocols followed by Hongyi, in the tradition of the Tang master Daoxuan 道宣, see Birnbaum 2007; on the Tang original rules, see Shinohara 2007.

ing death" (*linzhong shi* 臨終詩), usually composed to leave instructions to one's descendants. Monks also started to leave instructions to their disciples, first in prose, then in verse.¹² In Chan 禪 monasteries, in particular, a special tradition emerged: a master would leave instructions in prose to regulate his succession and the affairs of the monastery, while the more philosophical and moral teachings springing from the approaching death would be consigned to verse. Many of these poems, known as *gāthā* (in Chinese *偈*), were compositions in tetrasyllabic verse, inspired in form by the hymns of the ancient *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經). This poetry explored in a pithy language the identity of life and death, or rather, the insubstantiality of life and death, concepts that both lose significance once understood within the Buddhist cosmology and sense of reality.¹³ Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163), a famous master of the Linji 臨濟 lineage of Chan Buddhism in the Song period, for example, in his poetic testament attacked the importance of death as a defining moment:

Life, it is just like this;
And it is just like this, death.
To have or not a *gāthā*,
What is the burning issue?¹⁴

Others, like the Southern Song master Ruoyu 若愚 (a revealing pseudonym, meaning "I am like an idiot," in reference to the ideal of the empty mind), preferred to phrase their "farewell to the world" in ironic and open-ended terms:

If there is no home, where does one return to?
If it is a road at the edge of the clouds, who knows it?
Falling from the western mountain, the light of the moon blankets the stream,
just like the moment when the dream of the pond of the immortals ends.¹⁵

Here, the Buddhist master underlined the unsubstantial nature of death, and also made a final veiled attack on the Daoist concept of immortality, an idea that Buddhists found naïve and deceptive. Daoism, although concerned more

¹² Some of the oldest examples of Buddhist poems on mortality in colloquial Chinese have been found in Dunhuang 敦煌. Among the best known are poems by the monk Wang Fanzhi 王梵志 (fl. 7th century), translated in Demiéville 1982. This poetic tradition can also be found within the "precious scroll" (*baojuan* 寶卷) literature of later Buddhist lay groups.

¹³ Demiéville 1984, 10.

¹⁴ Demiéville 1984, 79–80.

¹⁵ Demiéville 1984, 85–86.

with longevity and transformation into an immortal than with conquering death, was yet another dominant intellectual and ritual response to death in China faced by Catholic missionaries in the late Ming that deserves a brief treatment.

Daoism

Among the staple of what we today call Daoism is the idea that all phenomena are coequal, and that this applies as well to life and death. All is originated by the Dao, the Way, which existed before heaven and earth, and the enlightened person who has understood the workings of the Way will be “unmindful of moral strictures and unconstrained by knowledge, [have] few desires, [be] unconcerned about life and death, and merged with nature.”¹⁶ This philosophical attitude to life and death did mean, however, that in Daoist yogic, meditational, and ritual practice no apparent attention was paid to the problem of death. The concern was to defeat death by negating its grip. By nourishing the body and thus reaching longevity during one’s life through breathing exercises, sexual hygiene, diet, gymnastics and drugs, one would set the stage for immortality. The early terms used since the Eastern Zhou period to characterize both processes were “prolonged life” (*changsheng* 長生), and “no death” (*wusi* 無死 or *busi* 不死). By the Warring States period, the sentence “to become an immortal” (*chengxian* 成仙) started to appear, indicating the emergence of a seamless conceptual continuity between ideas of longevity and immortality. An individual who followed the life regime and the moral code recommended by Daoist texts and experts would eventually become an immortal, a being with a purified body, endowed with healing power and other supernatural gifts. In the imagination of Daoist practitioners, these theories transformed the perception of the moment of death itself. The preferred way to attain immortality was to ascend to heaven, rising in the air and disappearing, a feat achievable only by the most refined masters. More commonly, adepts would undergo the process of so-called “leaving through transformation” (*huaqu* 化去). Individuals who had reached longevity and attained perfect practice would predict the exact time and circumstances of their death. This was, however, a false death. Their bodies would in fact vanish, leaving their graves empty, and they would be resurrected as immortal beings. There was no death and no afterlife to speak of.¹⁷

Things changed in part as a response to the arrival of Buddhist ideas about reincarnation at the beginning of the Common Era. Some Daoist

¹⁶ Mair 2000, 43.

¹⁷ Penny 2000, 124.

schools in the medieval periods, like the Shangqing 上清 (Supreme Clarity) tradition, for example, developed new conceptions surrounding the death of the physical body, introducing procedures that assured life beyond the grave, a sort of rebirth after death. Inhabitants of the underworld could aspire to reach immortality through different stages, ascending to the highest heavens. This rebirth attained in the afterlife was a way to salvation, not a re-entering into the cycle of reincarnation on earth as envisioned by Buddhists.¹⁸ The monastic Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) tradition, partly influenced by Chan Buddhism and still existing today, also gave great importance to meditations on mortality, to “jar people from their complacent indifference.” Quanzhen founder Wang Zhongyang 王重陽 (1113–1170), for example, dug himself a grave, calling it “Tomb of the Living Dead” and lived in it for three years, practicing meditation. He also drew for his disciples a meditational picture of a skeleton, to encourage them to forsake mundane pursuits and seek instead spiritual clarity. He accompanied the picture with a poem entitled “Painted skeleton to warn Ma Yu 馬鈺,” one of his closest disciples:

Lamentable is the sad plight of people! I now need to draw a picture of a skeleton. During his life he was only able to greedily commit evil deeds. He did not cease until he ended up like this.

When you come into existence you should be aware of the torrents of dusty labor. The true mind of purity and clarity is your true treasure. ...¹⁹

Yet, whether in its more philosophical and intellectual version, or in its yogic, ritual and meditational practices, Daoism seemed in the end little concerned with the moment of death itself, focusing on dissolving it into longevity and immortality, using it to foster meditation, or exorcising it through rebirth in the afterlife.

Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism

Ricci and his companions had to contend with Buddhist and Daoist ideas about death and the afterlife. But the Jesuits, while allying themselves with certain aspects of the Confucian intellectual agenda, also decided to combat what they perceived as the agnosticism of Confucian literati of their times,

¹⁸ Robinet 2000, 213; on the Lingbao 靈寶 School’s similar attitude to death, see Bokenkamp 2007.

¹⁹ On Wang Zhongyang and Quanzhen’s attitude to death, see Yao Tao-chung, in Kohn 2004, 568; Eskildsen 2004, 167–68; Wang’s poem is translated in Eskildsen 2004, 167. One of Wang Zhongyang’s disciples, Tan Chutuan 譚處端, followed the example of his master, drawing a skeleton as meditational prop and penning similar stanzas, translated in Eskildsen 2004, 167–68.

including their apparent lack of concern for death and the afterlife. It is indeed the wisdom received in modern scholarship that death was not a central concern for Confucian literati. Did Confucius not say, after all, “Not yet understanding life, how could you understand death?” Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the great master of the Song period, openly recognized the marginality of the discourse on death in Confucianism: “The records of the sages and the worthies in the Six Classics are rich, but almost no discussion about death can be found in them. The reason for this is that they treat death as nothing but an ordinary event.”²⁰

However, recent research has shown that interest in the problem of death and the afterlife increased during the late Ming period, particularly in the circle of Neo-Confucian scholars attracted to the teachings of Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472–1529).²¹ This shift was partly linked to the moral and doctrinal influence of Buddhism, as well as to the historical context of the last decades of the Ming, characterized by intellectual exploration, factionalism, war, and increasing anxiety and probing about death as a consequence. Signs of this shift can be detected in the words of Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), one of the most radical followers of Wang Yangming’s School of the Mind. He observed that

If one cannot explore, and come to understand the fundamental causes of life and death, then even brilliant work, outstanding talent, and the most successful career will in an instant turn into empty trappings when death comes upon one. In the end, all those things eventually have nothing to do with the attributes of life, of what benefit will they be?²²

Members of the Wang Yangming School recognized that the desire for life and the fear of death were acceptable human feelings, and an expression of the kind of vision of human nature that the school advocated, in reaction to the scholastic and coldly rational views of the orthodox Cheng-Zhu school of the Song period. As one of these late Ming critics, Yang Qiyuan 楊起元

²⁰ Quotation by Confucius in *Lunyu* 論語, 11.12; quotation by Zhu Xi in *Ba Zheng Jingyuan jian* 跋鄭景元簡 (“Epilogue to Zheng Jingyuan’s Writings”), in *Zhu Wengong wenji* 朱文公文集, j. 80, as quoted in Peng forthcoming. Much later, the Kangxi Emperor in his valedictory Edict of 1717 confirmed the pervasiveness of this Confucian attitude to death: “All men who live must die. As Zhu Xi said, ‘The principle of the cyclical cosmic forces is like dawn and night.’ And Confucius said, ‘Live contentedly and await Heaven’s will.’ These sayings express the great Way of the Sages, so why should we be afraid?” See Spence 1975, 148.

²¹ My treatment of late Ming Confucian conceptions of death is based on the research by Peng Guoxiang (Peng forthcoming).

²² See Wang Ji’s *Zisong wenda* 自訟問答, in *Wang Longxi xiansheng quanji* 王龍溪先生全集, j. 15, as quoted in Peng forthcoming.

(1547–1599), observed in his “Reply to a friend about having no fear of death” (*Da youren bu pa si shuo* 答友人不死說):

The latter Confucian scholars [in the Song dynasty] were the ones who started the trend of avoiding talking about the fear of death. The result is that they ended up concealing their real feelings under the guise of having no fear of death. Finally, they really eliminated fear of death, and thus became separated from the Way. Oh! They simply did not think!²³

Thinking about death would help enlightened individuals to keep on the path to the Dao/Way, and also would allow them to live a serene life, and conquer their fear of death without suppressing it. Thus, these thinkers broke with the taboo of talking about death, and opened a public debate that recognized the human feelings elicited by the ending of life; this, in their view, transformed the approaching death into a moral tool to attain understanding of the Way.

Buddhist discourse on death undoubtedly greatly influenced these men. Wang Ji, for example, openly defended the Buddhist idea of *samsāra*, charging his contemporaries with an unfair critique of Buddhist ideas: “It is really bewildering that some Confucian scholars (*ruzhe* 儒者) take [the idea of death and rebirth] as heresy, and abstain from talking about it because they regard it as delusion.”²⁴ Nevertheless, while Buddhist doctrine considered life and death as epiphenomena devoid of substance (*wu* 無), late Ming followers of the School of the Mind, relying on the theory of aggregation and dispersal of the vital energy (*qi* 氣) found in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), attributed to this process a substantial reality (*you* 有), and explained it as a capacity for transformation from one state to another. Thus the termination of one’s physical life was seen as nothing but an instance in the endless circulation of *qi*. We can also speculate that the competitive and dangerous political life of the late Ming period contributed to make literati aware that the fleeting winds of court politics could bring their life to an end rather abruptly. They had to live a morally upright life, and be ready to die with dignity.

The European *ars moriendi* in China

It is against this varied background of intellectual and religious reflection on death and how to prepare for it that the Jesuits introduced the European tradition of *memento mori* and *ars moriendi*, to the perfection of which their

²³ See *Taishi Yang Fusuo xiansheng zhengxue bian* 太史楊復所先生證學編, j. 2, as quoted in Peng forthcoming.

²⁴ See Wang Ji’s *Xin’an doushan shuyuan huiyu* 新安門山書院會語, in *Wang Longxi xiansheng quanji*, j. 7, as quoted in Peng forthcoming.

Order had contributed in the course of the sixteenth century. The Jesuits were after the most intellectually refined public of the Chinese high literati. To capture their attention regarding death and its meaning, Ricci decided to highlight the themes of *vanitas mundi* and moral cultivation to prepare for a good death. This fit well with the Neo-Confucian formation of literati, who privileged the idea of a disinterested good moral life, and criticized the Buddhist insistence on rewards and punishments in the afterlife. Nevertheless, Ricci did not shirk from presenting the Christian understanding of the individual soul and the afterlife. Without belief in the immortality of the soul, in retribution *post mortem* for the sins committed, and in paradise and hell, one will not be concerned about eternal salvation, and will focus on life in this world. Ricci clearly saw the secular themes connected to the idea of *memento mori* as important in establishing a platform for the propagation of Christianity among literati: it was necessary to convince them of the fallacy in their understanding of life and death in order to introduce a Christian vision of these ideas, and instill in them a desire for salvation in the afterlife. Thus, the strategy of Ricci and his companions was to first advance preliminary explanations of life, death, and afterlife based on natural theology, and to confute Buddhist, Daoist and Neo-Confucian ideas contrary to Christian understandings.

For example, in the early 1610s, Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618) circulated and eventually published in Beijing a famous and extensive treatise on the seven capital sins and the seven virtues to overcome them, entitled *Qike* 七克 (The seven victories). The treatise received wide attention among scholars at the time, and had numerous reprints. Pantoja was clearly following the example of Ricci. The *Qike* tried to offer to a public of sympathetic literati a Christian “method” of moral betterment superior to that of the Confucian “ledgers of merit and demerit” so popular at the time. To do so, it often criticized existing practices. For example, Pantoja missed no occasion to attack the Buddhist idea of *karma*, and disparaged its automatic feature of retribution of good and evil, proposing instead the more stringent Catholic system of rewarding good and punishing evil. Yet, the focus remained on moral self-cultivation, and Pantoja treaded lightly on the terrain of the afterlife.²⁵

It was the second generation of missionaries, starting in the 1620s and 1630s, that more openly introduced to their converts the Catholic theology and devotional practices related to death. This happened after several Christian communities became more solidly established around China, and a need

²⁵ On *Qike*, see Waltner 1994; for a reliable discussion of the composition date and the existing editions, see Dudink 2001, 212n65.

to establish Catholic doctrine and rituals ensued. We know, for example, that in 1630 Chinese Christians in Fuzhou (Fujian) asked the missionary Giulio Aleni to establish an “Association for Good Death” (*shanzhong hui* 善終會). Aleni emphasized to his converts that “having a good death means having had a good life,” a reference to the need to conduct oneself with morality, and warned them against “Daoist” temptations for longevity: “How can [the aim of this association] be taken to mean no more than being blessed with longevity and dying at an advanced age?”²⁶ This seems to indicate that some Chinese Christians might have harbored a rather utilitarian approach, hoping that membership would grant them a longer life.

In fact, the Jesuits realized that while disinterested moral behavior might have been an appealing concept for some Confucian intellectuals, with the masses it was necessary to introduce more practical approaches to harness temptation and earn salvation. Even Jesuit writings in Chinese observed that most people tried to avoid sin out of “lower” motivations for “profit and loss”: salvation or damnation. This majority needed guidance (*jiao* 教) to be freed from sin and be led to salvation. This guidance was offered by the priest through sacramental confession and other forms of spiritual direction. Among these other means were meditation on sin and on the so called Four Last Ends (*Quatuor Novissima*, i.e., death, judgment, heaven, and hell).

China missionaries had thus to use “the promise of gain” and “the fear for loss,” as many religious orders (Jesuits, Capuchins and others) were doing in their “popular missions” across Europe at the time. Even among more intellectually refined audiences, Ricci had already introduced the first week of the famous *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, a practice that was specifically designed to elicit horror for one’s sins, to meditate on death, and to contemplate with all senses the frightening perspective of hell.²⁷ The missionary “pastoral of perfection” on how to lead a good life was accom-

²⁶ Zürcher 2007, 219.

²⁷ References to the practice of the first week of the *Exercises* by Chinese Christians at the time of Ricci can be found in *FR*, vol. 1, no. 398, 315, and *FR* vol. 2, no. 913, 489. Jesuit spiritual directors usually offered to lay people only the first of the four periods of increasing spiritual progression laid down in the *Exercises*; see Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 24–43. Chinese versions of the *Exercises* from ancient lists are mentioned in Bernard 1945, 30, 55; the CCT Database contains entries on several surviving Chinese texts of the *Exercises*, such as “Sheng Yinajue shen xing gongfu” 聖依納爵神行工夫 (Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, j. 2 of *Yesuhui li* 耶穌會例, late seventeenth century?, attributed to Prospero Intorcetta S.J.), published in *CCT BNF*, vol. 22; and *Shengjing guangyi* 聖經廣益 (Good advice from the Holy Scriptures, Beijing, ca. 1734), a manual based on the Scriptures to conduct the eight-day *Exercises* by Joseph Marie Anne de Moyriac de Mailla S.J., published in *CCT BNF*, vol. 14. See also Standaert 2009.

panied by a “pastoral of fear” on how to die well, and this spurred converts to look for rules and practices on how to be ready for the ultimate passage.²⁸

Around 1636, the Portuguese Jesuit João Frois (1591–1638), based in Hangzhou, compiled the first printed set of rules to help achieve a good death (*Shanzhong zhugong guili* 善終助功規例).²⁹ This rather practical compilation was based in part on a Latin liturgical manual printed in Nagasaki in 1605 for the use of the missionary clergy there; in China, however, the book was written in Chinese and conceived for the use of the laity, a necessary step given the scarcity of priests, and the need for friends and family members to comfort the moribund when sacramental assistance from a priest was difficult to obtain. The text was indeed mainly written for those helping (*zhuzhe* 助者) the moribund, in response to requests from Christians, as the preface mentions: “Some ask why in our Christian books we talk about how to live a good life, but not how to die a good death. I say that in our Christian books we talk both of how to live well, and how to die well.”³⁰

The book contained a description of what should be done at the time preceding and immediately following death, and included a collection of prayers to be recited at certain specific moments in the process. The preface offered a useful compendium of the difficulties encountered when approaching death, organized under four main rubrics:

1. the moribund experience difficulty in abandoning the lure of worldly possessions and affections;
2. the moribund know that they have committed countless sins in life, and can thus become discouraged;
3. they also fear to lose their soul to the devil’s temptations at this crucial last moment;
4. finally, they fear the idea of God’s judgment, and despair of been saved.

The book then listed practical advice on what should be done to avoid these pitfalls. In particular it observed that

²⁸ On the pastoral of fear, see the *magnum opus* by Delumeau (1990).

²⁹ *CCT ARSI*, vol. 5, 333–437. For bibliographic information on this text, see Standaert 2008, 106; and CCT Database.

³⁰ See Frois 1636, preface, 1b (*CCT ARSI*, vol. 5, 338). For the Japanese prototype of this text, see Cerqueira 1605; Ludovico Buglio translated into Chinese most of the section of Cerqueira’s text “De iuvandis, et Deo commendandis morientibus” (On helping the dying and recommending them to God) between 1676 and 1682, with the title *Shanzhong yi ying li dian* 善終瘞禮典 (*CCT BNF*, vol. 18, 505–572).

the devil knows that when people are about to die, it is his last chance to entice them. He then uses all his skill to win over humans, and his deviousness is truly remarkable, his strength enormous. Thus at the time of sickness, we must have some Christian friends to help us. If the sick relies on God’s mercy it is easy to avoid falling into the devil’s hands and the eternal perdition of hell.³¹

The manual continued, suggesting that the moribund should receive the sacraments of confession, communion, and extreme unction, and avoid

excessive fear for the end of life, and listen to the will of the Lord with peaceful mind. Death is the outcome of life, and the time at the end of life is the time of offering final tribute [to God]. ... This life is a journey, this earth is a battlefield. The traveler should not be scared of a distant place, and the soldier should not consider with apprehension his rest.

He or she should be made to listen to prayers and stories from the scriptures or the lives of saints, “so as to stop disorderly thoughts and keep the devil at bay.”³² That would usher death with a sense of serene joy.

It is, however, to another kind of text, and images associated with it, that we need to look if we want to better understand the theological and meditational approach to the topic of death introduced by the missionaries and eagerly adopted by Chinese converts. I have earlier referred to the spiritual practice of meditating on the so called “Four Last Ends” (*Quatuor Novissima*) i.e., death, judgment, heaven, and hell.³³ Between the 1630s and the early eighteenth century, Jesuits and members of other religious orders as well wrote treatises in Chinese to guide meditation on the Last Four Ends. Several catechetical works contained sections on the Four Ends, but some stand-alone texts also had a rather wide success. The Jesuit Alfonso Vagnone, for example, published in 1636 in Shanxi the *Discourse on the Four Ends* (*Si mo lun* 四末論), with revisions and financial sponsorship by some local prominent literati, a book eventually translated into Korean. In 1676, Philippe Couplet published in Shanghai the *True Discourse on the Four Ends* (*Si mo zhen lun* 四末真論), which was republished in 1825 and 1925. Among non-Jesuit works, we find the 1705 treatise *A Summary Meaning of the Four Ends* (*Si zhong lue yi* 四終略意) by the Augustinian Thomas Ortiz, published in Zhaoqing 肇慶 (Guangdong 廣東), and partly inspired by a 1584

³¹ See Frois 1636, preface, 1a–b (*CCT ARSI*, vol. 5, 337–338).

³² See Frois 1636, 4a–b (*CCT ARSI*, vol. 5, 347–348).

³³ A very good summary of the historical development of the idea of the Last Ends can be found in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 1932–1995, vols. 33–34, entry by Paul Tihon, “Fins Dernières (Méditations Des),” fasc. 33–34, columns 355–382.

Spanish tract in rhythmic verse on the Four Ends by the Andalusian religious poet Andrés de la Losa.³⁴

These treatises were all inspired by an explosion of early modern meditative literature on death, tracing its roots to the late medieval tradition. Erasmus initiated this new genre of spiritual writing with his famous *De praeparatione ad mortem* (On preparing for death, 1534). The genre continued to find great favor both in Catholic and Anglican circles, and the Jesuits, inspired by the meditation on death contained in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, became the most important writers on the topic in the Catholic camp. Roberto Bellarmino's *De arte bene moriendi* (Art of dying well, 1620), for example, had an enormous success, with 56 editions in a variety of European languages in the seventeenth century alone.³⁵

This literature, once translated into Chinese, not only presented the original concepts of the European versions, but also engaged and critiqued the conceptions of death and afterlife held by Daoists and Buddhists. Couplet, for example, in his preface to the *Si mo zhen lun* observed that, even if the Four Ends seemed self-explanatory and a natural outcome of human life (at least in his view), they needed to be explained in China because of the false ideas diffused by Daoists and Buddhists. Couplet complained that the former talked about longevity and avoidance of death (*changsheng busi* 長生不死), while the latter taught that even in paradise the wheel of reincarnation would continue, but that it was also possible to ascend from hell to heaven, through merits acquired by others. These theories clearly contradicted the image of the afterlife propounded by Catholicism, sealed by the irrevocable judgment of God, placing the individual soul forever among the saved or the damned.³⁶

Couplet's book was divided into four parts, each dedicated to one of the Four Ends, and graced at the beginning of each section by images that would be useful in conducting visual meditation. In the first section on death, in an image called "mirror of the self," a partly toothless skeleton perked out from a sepulcher, announcing to the reader: "The moment of death cannot be

³⁴ Information on these texts is culled from the CCT Database. The full title of Losa's work is *Verdadero Entretenimiento del Christiano, en el qual se trata de las quatro postrimerias del Hombre, que son: Muerte, Iuzio, Infierno, Gloria. Compuesto en verso de otava rima*, Seville, Alonso de la Barrera, 1584.

³⁵ On these texts, see *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 1932–1995, entry by Paul Tihon, "Fins Dernières (Méditations Des)," fasc. 33–34, columns 355–382; Vogt 2004.

³⁶ As a matter of fact, Catholicism contemplated the intermediate domain of purgatory, and by this time had developed a complex theological understanding and devotional practice of prayers and indulgences, in many respects similar to those of Buddhism; for details, see Menegon 2006.

avoided. I was once like you. Now, how could you not reflect on this? You will be like me, now how could you not regulate [yourself]? The illusion of glory does not last. Worldly glory all end up in a grave."



The First of the Four Last Things: Death.

Philippe Couplet, *Si mo zhen lun* 四末真論 (1676), BAV: Borg. cin. 345.7, f. 1b.

A couple of pages later, the corpse talked again to the reader in a rhythmic text entitled "The warning words of a skeleton" (*Kulou jingyu* 骷髏警語), that could be easily memorized and recited. Then several "famous sentences" of western saints and sages (including Seneca) closed the section. The same general pattern was used in each of the remaining three sections, and excerpts from Vagnone's earlier text on the topic closed the book. The most striking feature of this text was the use of images and rhythmic texts

easy to recite.³⁷ In fact, we read in several sources that Chinese Christians were often intrigued by the iconography of the Four Last Ends and especially of Heaven and Hell, shown to them by missionaries. This might have been due in part to familiarity with Buddhist depictions of paradise, hell, and judgment in the afterlife; but perhaps also to the jarring nature of Western prints of skulls and skeletons, a theme largely avoided in Chinese late imperial iconography. As Wilt Idema observes, “Skull and skeleton, to judge from their almost total absence on preserved paintings, never have been a popular subject in traditional Chinese pictorial art.”³⁸ The rare apparition of skeletons in late imperial literati painting, such as the famous scene inspired by Western anatomical prints imported by the Jesuits in Luo Pin’s 羅聘 (1733–1799) masterpiece “Pleasures of Ghosts” (*Gui qu tu* 鬼趣圖, Beijing, 1772) is the exception that proves the rule.³⁹

In the preface to Niccolò Longobardo’s *On death* (*Si shuo* 死說, ca. 1631), for example, penned by his confrere Giacomo Rho, we read that the occasion for the writing of this short book was an encounter between Longobardo and a Chinese guest, who had asked explanations on “an image of the mirror of death” (*si jian yi tu* 死鑒一圖) that the missionary had pasted over his bed. The picture was accompanied by some maxims in a European language inscribed on the side, which required a translation. In all likelihood, the image was similar to that found in Couplet, and was used by the priest for his own meditation and as *memento mori*.⁴⁰ Other sources mention the copious use of images to elicit meditation on death. The Lithuanian-Polish Jesuit Andrzej Rudomina (or Andrius Rudamina, 1596–1633), for example, showed prints of the souls in hell, purgatory and paradise to his Fujianese followers in the 1640s, and converts mentioned that missionaries carried prints of the Last Judgment.⁴¹

³⁷ See Couplet’s text and images in *CCT BNF*, vol. 24, 166, 168–169. Similar texts existed in the contemporary Chinese literati tradition as well. The early Qing poet Jin Bao 金堡 (1614–1680), for example, who had fought the invading Manchus as an official in several southern Ming regimes before becoming a Buddhist monk, wrote seven song lyrics on the painting of a skeleton, a typical expression of the Chinese *vanitas mundi* religious-philosophical literature, rooted in ancient texts dating as far back as *Zhuangzi* 莊子; see *Quan Qing ci*, vol. 2, 990–991. This elicited a response by Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), who penned four other similar compositions; see Wang 1988–1996, vol. 15, 730–731. Thanks to Li Wai-ye for these references.

³⁸ Idema 1993, 192.

³⁹ See Standaert 1999 for a discussion of this painting and its “Jesuit” sources.

⁴⁰ Longobardo 1631, Preface, p. 1a, in *CCT BNF*, vol. 23, 171.

⁴¹ See *Kouduo richao*, j. 1, pp. 16b–17b (*CCT ARSI*, vol. 12, 68–70); see Standaert 1993, 57n14, for reference to other such pictures mentioned in *Kouduo richao*. On

The church of Hangzhou 杭州 in Zhejiang 浙江 was decorated with large canvasses on similar themes. At the entrance gates were four paintings of the Last Ends (death, judgment, paradise and hell), accompanied by an explanation in Chinese characters. While literati could read the Chinese inscriptions, illiterate could enjoy the figures and the stories as explained to them.⁴² Upon entering the gates, therefore, the first images encountered by a visitor were the most shocking: the Four Last Ends, presenting the themes of death and the afterlife. The Hangzhou cycle of paintings literally brought together the complex interaction of the pastorals of moral perfection and of fear for damnation which underpinned the idea of a “good death.”

Confession at Death and the “Pastoral of Fear”

In spite of attempts to emphasize moral self-cultivation over fear of damnation in living a good life and experiencing a good death, for the vast majority of Chinese Christians the complex sin-death-damnation remained the biggest anxiety-producing feature of Christianity. The church offered through sacramental confession and the intercession of saints ways to assuage those fears. One of the most compelling reasons advanced by theologians and spiritual writers to engage in frequent sacramental confession in the seventeenth century was precisely to be prepared at the moment of death:

The persons ... who confess frequently are more assured that when death will reach them, they will be in the grace of God, and as a consequence, they will be saved. On the contrary, those who confess only very rarely will be quite likely surprised by death first or later, as it is easy to fall again into sin, given the bad disposition to which they are accustomed. Then they will be eternally damned.⁴³

To die without confession was quite possible in China, given the small number of priests available. A list of Christian vocabulary and useful sentences

images of the Four Last Ends in China, see Dudink 2006; on images of Christian hell and paradise in China, see Standaert 1994 and Menegon 2007; cf. Civil 1996, especially 393–399, “L’enfer dans les ‘Imagènes de la Historia Evangélica’,” i.e., the work of Jeronimo Nadal S.J., reproduced in China by Aleni.

⁴² As Charles Le Gobien S.J. put it, “every painting was like a preacher, who announced to all onlookers the truth of the Gospel, in a way accommodated to the capabilities of each, and to their intelligence. Each would get some teaching: the rustic people (*il popolo rozzo*) from the figures that they saw, and the literati from the explanations attached.” See Capizzi 1989, 10, quoting from Le Gobien’s *Istoria dell’Editto dell’imperatore della Cina in favore della religione Cristiana*, Turin, 1699. On images of the Four Ends in early modern Europe, see e.g. Martins 1997.

⁴³ Segneri 1696, 271–272.

compiled by a missionary as a linguistic exercise, entitled "Matters of religion" (*Fengjiao de shiqing* 奉教的事情; 1700–1710?), seems to confirm this anxious link among sin, death and damnation. Grouped together under two adjacent headings we find the following concepts:

Good death; to die with or without consciousness; to die quickly; to die well; to die badly; hell of eternal suffering; purgatory; limbo puerorum; limbo sanctorum; to descend to hell; paradise; to ascend to heaven; soul; souls of purgatory; not to have exhaled the last breath yet; to exhale the last breath; the soul has left the body; cadaver; corpse; to leave the world; to die; to die without confession.⁴⁴

This cascading sequence of concepts related to death and the afterlife climaxed in the last expression of the list: death without confession (*meiyou gaojie si* 沒有告解死). Confession was strongly connected in the mind of many with the last hour (*linzhongshi* 臨終時), and numerous anecdotes on confession *in articulo mortis* can be found scattered in missionary sources. The juncture was momentous indeed. The devil was literally waiting for the delicate time of the last hour to snatch away the souls of the faithful, as revealed in an episode involving an old Chinese Christian woman "on her way to the other life" in the 1640s. She called for a priest, confessed and received the extreme unction. However, just before dying, the devil appeared to her, and tried to convince her that the sacraments she had just received were invalid. She then shouted at him, showing him the rosaries and religious medals hanging on the wall, and thus forced him out of the room, dying in peace soon thereafter. Had she surrendered to the diabolical delusion, she would have endangered her soul.⁴⁵

The imagery of judgment in the afterlife and its legal implications were powerfully present in the mind of converts approaching death, and concerns for salvation triggered their desire to ritually cleanse their soul before departing from this life, in the hope of seeing fulfilled the promise of "immortal life and new worlds for oneself and one's relatives."⁴⁶ Missionaries, whenever possible, were called in haste to the bed of the moribund, as a cleansed soul was considered necessary for salvation by many Chinese

⁴⁴ BNF *Chinois* 7046 III, f. 31b; this manuscript text is a Chinese revision of José Monteiro's "Christão e suas obrigações" (A Christian and his obligations) in "Vera et Unica Praxis breviter ediscendi, ac expeditissime loquendi Sinicum idioma" (ca. 1695–1705), ff. 26–30, as preserved in Biblioteca da Academia das Ciências in Lisbon (Manuscrito Azul, no. 421); see CCT Database.

⁴⁵ Gouvea 1998, 85.

⁴⁶ These words referred to a 70-year old military official in Chengdu 成都 (Sichuan 四川) who became a zealous Christian in the early 1640s, "grande discipolo do que prometia vida immortal e novos mundos pera si e pera os seus"; see Gouvea 1998, 211.

Christians, and when news that a missionary was passing through in a given area reached local people, they made sure to call him for urgent death-bed confessions.⁴⁷ The faithful's preoccupation with confession at death became particularly urgent and widespread during moments of social breakdown and military upheaval. During the Qing siege of Fuzhou 福州 in 1647, for example, the number of confessions and extreme unctions increased enormously among the besieged, especially women, who felt enfeebled by hunger, and became aware that their end was near.⁴⁸

Mary was also an important intercessor at the moment of death, and her motherly presence was a soothing reassurance that salvation was at hand. Every Christian who had memorized the Hail Mary (and practically all learned it by heart since childhood, and often recited it at night in chorus with the family) was aware that the Holy Mother could pray for them "in the hour of death (*wodeng si hou* 我等死候)."⁴⁹ When priests could not come for the final rites, including confession, Mary could be invoked as advocate in the tribunal of the afterlife. In 1733, in the region of Zhangzhou 漳州 (Fujian), an octagenarian Christian, who had spent years bed-ridden reciting innumerable rounds of the rosary during his waking hours, fell mortally ill and became blind. Then he told his son that in a vision he had seen Jesus, who had announced him his death within three days. On the third day, he could no longer talk, but asked for a brush, and wrote, in spite of his blindness "The most holy Mary is accompanying me in judgment." Soon after he passed away murmuring "Yawu Maliya" 亞物瑪利亞.⁵⁰

Conclusion

It would be an error to think that Christian literati and commoners held different feelings towards death and the eternal consequences of their sins. Chinese converts embraced not only the moral dimension of Christian beliefs on death, but also their religious, devotional, and ritual dimensions. A poem by the prominent Hangzhou Christian literatus Zhang Xingyao 張星曜, entitled "On death" ("Si hou ming" 死候銘) and belonging to a set of four poems on "The Four Ends" ("Si mo ming" 四末銘) shows that educated converts shared the iconographic and ritual world of Christian commoners. These verses were possibly inspired in the 1680s by the first painting of the

⁴⁷ See Gouvea 1998, 91.

⁴⁸ Gouvea 1998, 347.

⁴⁹ The Chinese text of the Hail Mary is recited: 天主聖母瑪利亞。為我等罪人。今祈天主。及我等死候; see Brunner 1964, 275.

⁵⁰ González 1955–1967, vol. 2, 239n6, citing De La Cruz, "Narracion historica," 1734.

Novissima on death commissioned by Intorcetta for the local church mentioned above. These stanzas eerily echo the *canzone* translated by Ricci into Chinese that opened my essay, but with an even stronger sense of urgency, and a clear reference to the sacrament of confession (“Convert to good and correct your faults”) and to the standard meditations accompanying a good Christian death (“Do not indulge the desires of your flesh, nor depart from thoughts of the Way”):

The time of your death,
is so sudden that it cannot be known.
The good and evil of your life,
at this point cannot be altered.
Wife and children all encircle you,
as their love and longing seek to hold you,
But sickness and pain oppress your body,
while the fear and dread are unbearable.
If the Lord does not protect you,
you will surely be bound by Satan.
Convert to good and correct your faults,
guarding against danger hour by hour.
Do not indulge the desires of your flesh,
nor depart from thoughts of the Way.
Time is a galloping colt,
and you still must be unwearied in your efforts.⁵¹

Only by resisting Satan’s temptation through the practices of “good death” and sacramental confession, the dread of the retribution for one’s sins could become bearable. By the 1680s, a century after the arrival of Ricci in China, the Christian conceptions of death and afterlife had been firmly established within the Christian milieu. In the early seventeenth century, Ricci had coached his religious message in the relatively universal moral terms of natural theology and the ancient classical wisdom of the Stoic kind, allying himself with Confucianism, while attacking Buddhism and Daoism. But, as it is always the case in any instance of cultural exchange, if pre-existing Chinese religious and philosophical discourses had not been there to offer the right environment for new ideas to become established, the Jesuits would

⁵¹ I have adopted Mungello’s translation (Mungello 1994, 169), but modified it in two points: *qian shan gai guo* 遷善改過 “Move toward the good and away from evil” I rendered as “Convert to good and correct your faults”; and *shang wu zi zi* 尚務孳孳 “and it you must urgently heed” as “and you still must be unwearied in your efforts,” where *zi zi* 孳孳 means “diligent, hardworking,” and alludes to the expression *zi zi / zi zi wei shan* 孜孜//孳孳為善 “persevere in doing good”; see Zhang 1680s(?), f. 11b.

have probably faced a much more difficult battle in spreading their beliefs and practices. As observed by scores of scholars, the historical conjuncture of the late Ming period – an age of unprecedented soul-searching and anxiety – created the conditions for a temporary “perfect storm,” allowing the Catholic ideas and iconography on good death to nest within the imagination of some Chinese. Exorcising during one’s life the fear of death, a problem confronting all human beings regardless of their status and beliefs, remained one of the defining characteristics of Catholicism as practiced in late imperial China.

As shown by recent research, the devising of hybrid Christian-Chinese funerary rituals (i.e., *post mortem* rituals) greatly preoccupied Chinese converts and missionaries during the course of the seventeenth century, a fact that fits well with the great emphasis on the reverence for ancestors and the management of ghosts central to Chinese religious practice.⁵² Elaborate preparations for death, however, remained in China mostly the preserve of a few enlightened members of the Buddhist clergy and their most devout lay followers, or of the rare Confucian scholar practicing “quiet sitting.” As a matter of fact, Buddhist critics found the Christian discourse of *ars moriendi* rather objectionable. In the 1630s, for example, the layman Huang Zhen 黃貞 flatly accused the Jesuits of “teach[ing] their followers to hate life and enjoy death, and to regard dying as being liberated from prison,” and found Christians “despicable because of their morbid preoccupation with death and the hereafter.”⁵³ Yet, to the chagrin of Huang, there was a public for these “despicable” ideas and practices in late imperial China. Catholic religious practice, with the aids of popular prayer and meditational manuals, special iconography, and the institution of associations, reached a public of literates and illiterates alike within Christian circles, and attempted to attract possible new converts at the momentous final stage of life, with the promise of “immortal life and new worlds for oneself and one’s relatives.”

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Abbreviations

- CCT ARSI* Standaert and Dudink 2002. *Yesuhui Luoma dang’anguan Ming-Qing Tianzhujiào wénxiàn*
- CCT BNF* Standaert, Dudink, and Monnet 2009. *Faguo guojia tushuguan Ming-Qing Tianzhujiào wénxiàn*

⁵² See Standaert 2008.

⁵³ Huang Zhen in *Shengchao Poxie ji* 聖朝破邪集 (Collection of the Sacred Dynasty to refute heterodoxy 1639), as summarized in Zürcher 2007, 136.

- CCT Database Adrian Dudink and Nicolas Standaert (eds.), Chinese Christian Texts Database, online resource at <http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/sinology/cct/>
- BNF Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
- FR D'Elia 1942–1949. *Fonti Ricciane*
- TXCH Wu 1965. *Tianxue chuhan*
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