Espionage, Adultery, and Witchcraft: Rumor and Imagination Transplant in the Anti-Catholic Persecution of Late Ming China

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Abstract
Catholic missionaries have suffered numerous persecutions since their arrival in Ming China in 1583. Rumors which functioned either as the causation or as the main content of the accusations against Catholic missionaries played a vital role in the rise and development of anti-Catholic movements in Late Ming China. In terms of the contents, these rumors can be divided into three categories: rumors accusing missionaries of conducting espionage activities in China, rumors accusing missionaries of having sexual misconducts with local women, and rumors accusing missionaries of performing sorceries. Besides, different images of missionaries were created in these rumors, including spies dispatched by Portuguese from Macau, human traffickers, children-eaters, adulterers, sorcerers, and heretics. The initiation, circulation, and manipulation of these rumors and the construction of different negative images of Catholic missionaries are not only products of the imagination transplant mechanism, but also attempts of anti-Catholic opponents to “stigmatize” missionaries and construct the heterodox-teaching image of Catholicism.

Keywords
rumor, Catholic missionary, anti-Catholic persecution, imagination transplant, late Ming China

Introduction
The arrival of Jesuits to China during the Late Ming Dynasty is a significant event in the entire history of cultural exchange between China and the West. The prestigious late Qing scholar Liang Qichao commented in his intellectual history of China that “the introduction of the European learning of astronomy and mathematics in the late Ming dynasty was a significant public case in all of Chinese intellectual history that deserves intensive and extensive study.” (Liang, 1989, p. 8). Professor Fan Shuzhi apparently agrees with Liang’s point by comparing it with the introduction of Buddhism in China. He states, “although it is generally agreed that the introduction of Buddhism has profoundly affected Chinese culture, the Jesuits’ coming to China in the late Ming dynasty is not only comparable, but perhaps even more so” (Fan, 2015, p. 3). As the “protagonists” of such a great historical event, the Jesuits represented by the “generation of giants” (Dunne, 1962) are honored as the “forerunners of cultural exchanges between China and the West” by many scholars (Xu, 1993). However, what awaited them when they first arrived in China was seemingly endless harassment or even persecution, rather than a warm welcome. According to the calculations of Jesuit Alvaro Semedo, there had already been 54 acts of persecution against Catholic missionaries before the first nationwide Nanjing anti-Catholic persecution in 1616 (Semedo, 1655, p. 174). Among all these persecutions, rumors either functioned as the causations of persecutions or as the main contents of accusations, contributing immensely to the initiation and development of anti-Catholic persecutions in late Ming China.

Interestingly, despite the fact that anti-Catholic opponents were usually thousands of miles apart, they attacked missionaries by deployed similar rumors, as if spontaneously springing up. In terms of their content, the rumors against missionaries recorded in the anti-Catholic literature written by anti-Catholic scholar-officials and Catholic apologetic literature written by Catholic missionaries and their followers can be roughly divided into three categories: rumors about

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Espionage, rumors about sexual misconduct, and rumors about performing sorcery.

In addition, these rumors created a variety of negative images of missionaries, including spies dispatched by the Portuguese from Macau, human traffickers, children-eaters, adulterers, and sorcerers. Although these images of missionaries seem completely unfounded today, they were taken as true in late Ming China; not just the products of an imagination transplant mechanism based on the knowledge framework of the parties to the rumors and what they had seen or simply heard of, they were more importantly the consequences of the manipulation of rumors by anti-Catholic scholar-officials to stigmatize missionaries and construct an image of Catholicism as heterodox doctrine and thus equated it with other Chinese secret societies represented by the White Lotus Teaching and Non-Action Teaching.

The different definitions of rumors given by sociologists and psychologists reflect the fact that the initiation, circulation, and manipulation of rumors are closely related to the socio-political environment. Therefore, after elaborating on the definitions and social functions of rumors, this paper first discusses the question of how the arrival of missionaries in Late Ming China spurred the creation of rumors against them by taking into consideration the social and political environments at that time; and second, elaborates on the manifestations of the three kinds of rumors against missionaries, and then explores issues such as the role of the imagination transplant mechanism in the initiation, circulation, and manipulation of these rumors as well as the efforts made by anti-Catholic figures to construct a heterodox image of Catholicism through these rumors.

**Definitions and Social Functions of Rumor**

As the title of the book *Rumeurs: le plus vieux média du monde* suggests, rumors used to play a crucial role in people’s efforts to understand the outside world. However, the academic study of this significant social phenomenon did not receive due attention until sociologist Gordon W. Allport and psychologist Leo Postman, with the support of the American government, published a series of studies in 1946 and 1947. Through experimental research, Allport and Postman put forward the famous “basic law of rumor,” which emphasizes the multiplicative relation between “the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned” and “the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue” (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 9). In other words, under this $R(\text{umor}) = 1 \times A(\text{mbiguity})$ formula, rumors will not exist if either of these two factors is zero (Allport & Postman, 1946, 1947, p. 502). Based on their experimental research, they summarized a rumor as “a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being presented” (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 9).

Later, in the late 1960s and 1970s, some sociologists, represented by Tamotsu Shibutani and Rosnow, criticized the experimental research of Allport and Postman as “ignoring” the social contexts within which rumors develop, spread, and gain meaning, because rumor is a social act occurring in social situations and involving redundant and reciprocal interactions” (Miller, 2005, p. 507). Moreover, Peterson and Gist (1951) also criticized the Allport-Postman approach from the perspective of the relation between rumor and public opinion as reducing rumor to a single chain of subjects and unilateral verbal communication, and as neglecting the possibility that the same individual, when transmitting rumor to a succession of persons, may communicate a different version in each instance, not just because of faulty memory but because of differences in his relationship with them (p. 161). Another criticism of their work was their biased preconception of the characteristics of rumors as inaccurate, distorted, exaggerated, and threatening to social order. This is quite understandable, given that the main motivation of Allport and Postman’s research on rumors was their concern about the potential damage to morality in military and national safety caused by minatory rumors that spread needless alarm and raised unreasonable hopes during World War II (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. vii). Based on this criticism, Shibutani, from a sociological perspective, put forward that rumor is a kind of improvised news generated in the process of discussion among a group of people and a convergence of views in the search for satisfactory explanations of an event (Shibutani, 1966). In his opinion, rumors are collective behaviors that try to explain phenomena and manage risks when facing potential dangers under conditions of uncertainty rather than a kind of social pathological behavior.

Based on previous research on rumor, psychologists Nicolas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, taking into consideration different research focuses on rumor, namely the social context of the initiation of rumor, the characteristics of the circulation of rumor, and the practical social functions of rumor, defined it as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007a, p. 13). Following the logic of Shibutani, they did not take rumor as a social pathological behavior that can only bring chaos to society but regarded it as a normal collective social behavior with functions to “make sense and manage risk.” In another article, they put forward another social function of rumors, that is, to preserve social order, enhance internal cohesion, and establish or reconstruct the internal power structure (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007b, p. 13). In their view, from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, the main functions of rumors are to strengthen the sense of belonging to “people of our own” and the sense of isolation of “people from outside.” Here the so-called “people from outside” need not refer to those who actually came from
other places, but rather to those who do not belong to the same cultural category as most local residences. For instance, in the book *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History*, the author Barend ter Haar refers to this group of people as “marginalized persons” including fortune-tellers, monks, Taoists, and midwives, and these “people from outside” can easily become scapegoats when in front of “strange stories” or rumors that were usually tremendously effective in arousing collective fear and violent reaction among residents in local societies (Haar, 2006, p. 53).

Similar situation can also be found in Kuhn’s study on the Chinese sorcery scare of 1768 in which the marginalized persons, particularly the poor, homeless, and those with religious background in this scene became the major target of blame (Kuhn, 2006). During this process, by manipulating rumors, authorities can not only deal with potential threats to the existing social order, but more importantly reaffirm or even improve their social status, power, and prestige in local societies.

Mainly influenced by the *Annales School* that insists on the significance of social divisions and their collective mentalities, rumors started to become the subject of the greatest attention and interest to historians. They put rumors in specific historical contexts when analyzing the causation of certain significant historical events. For instance, in the study of French Revolution, instead of merely focusing on the political leaders, some historians turned to peasants, the absolute majority of the entire revolution. The most representative works in this regard are Georges Lefebvre’s *The Great Year of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* and Arlette Farge’s *Dire et mal dire: L’opinion publique au XVIIIe siècle* and *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the Revolution*. Both of them conducted intensive researches on rumors that were circulated before and during the revolution through a range of police reports and archival source, trying to analyze the connection between the circulation of “big scare” and the outburst of “big revolution.” In their studies, rumor was deemed as a collective behavior to interpret current events through a familiar language and a major factor that initiated and further accelerated the entire revolution.

In summary, rumors are usually generated in the social context of ambiguity, danger, or potential threats. To explain phenomena and manage potential risks, people collectively create and spread unproven information or rumors. When events develop seriously enough to threaten the existing social order, local authorities start to manipulate these rumors to preserve social order and to reaffirm or improve their social status, power, and prestige.

It precisely explains why the arrival of Catholic missionaries in late Ming China caused many rumors about them to spread and why people from different social layers, namely commoners, local elites, and officials, employed rumors to attack missionaries in anti-Catholic persecutions.

First, the arrival of the missionaries worsened the already unstable and uncertain social circumstances. In the first few years after missionaries came to China, the Ming dynasty suffered a series of political, military, and social unrest: Tartars threatened the security of the Chinese borderland in the north; Japanese pirates plundered and looted along the seacoast in the southeast; the Toungoo dynasty of Myanmar was at war with Ming troops in the southwest; and the Portuguese living in Macau were considered a barbaric, aggressive, and dangerous element in the south. Besides these struggles, externally, China launched wars against Japanese in the Wanli Korean Campaign, and internally, military rebellions represented by Bozhou Rebellion and Ordos Campaign severely threatened the local security, not to mention the countless peasant uprisings. All of these resulted in the instability of social circumstances.

The arrival of Catholic missionaries to these places was like rubbing salt in the wound. As Allport and Postman (1946) states, “a stranger whose business is unknown to the small town where he takes up residence will breed many legends designed to explain to curious minds why he has come to town” (p. 503), which is exactly the dilemma encountered by Catholic missionaries at the very beginning of their arrival in China. When the Jesuits Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci were allowed to reside in Zhaoqing (肇慶) in 1583, they were complete strangers to the local residents, and indeed far stranger than any person they had ever met before. For fear of arousing suspicion and hostility, the missionaries decided to conceal their true purposes in coming to China, but simply claimed themselves to be attracted by China’s prosperous and peaceful society as well as the admirable culture (Ricci, 2014, p. 96). Obviously, this did not satisfy the suspicion of local residents. Thus, as strangers with unstated purposes, soon legends about them sprouted and circulated widely not only in Zhaoqing, but throughout Guangdong Province. However, even though Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci wore Buddhist robes and claimed to be “Western Buddhists” or “Foreign Buddhists,” they were still considered “Folangji barbarians” by the Chinese, as they shared the facial appearances and languages of the Portuguese living in Macau, with whom maintained close contact. In *Zhifang waiji* by Jesuit Giulio Aleni, it is recorded that “In the northeast of Yixibaniya (以西把尼亞, Spain) is the country called Fulangcha (拂郎差, France.” Due to the fact that *Fulangcha* is located within *Ouluoba* (歐逻巴, Europe), Muslims tended to call all westerners *Folangji*. Therefore, *Folangji* was a mis-transliteration of *Fulangcha*, a term used by Muslims for France, to refer to the Portuguese and Spanish in the Ming dynasty, which gradually became a derogatory term (Aleni, 1996, pp. 82–83). Due to the notorious reputation of Portuguese in Ming China, the arrival of two “Folangji barbarians” was naturally regarded as a severe threat to local stability, leading to ambiguous and uncertain social circumstances and providing a hotbed for the breeding of rumors. It can be said that the rumors speculating about the identities
and true intentions of Catholic missionaries coming to China were collective efforts of local residences to make sense and manage potential risks. However, thanks to the notorious reputation of the Portuguese, these speculative rumors were unfortunately usually slanderous.

Second, the behaviors of the missionaries after arriving in China, including building churches, maintaining contact with the Portuguese in Macau, seeking to attract the Chinese to a brand-new foreign religion, establishing a close-knit yet secret religious organization, performing mysterious religious rituals within the confined spaces of a church, and so forth, were seen as a severe challenge to the existing social order, the security of local society, and the authority of local elites. In response, local elites manipulated the previous speculative rumors about the identities and purposes of missionaries to stigmatize them, thereby strengthening the existing social order and reaffirming their social status and authority in local societies. The significant role played by these rumors in anti-Catholic persecutions can be appreciated through three aspects. First, rumors about espionage can easily arouse the attention of the government; second, rumors about sexual misconduct and performing sorcery can easily arouse collective panic among local commoners, leading to collective reactions, usually violent; and third, the heterodox image of Catholicism that was constructed in these rumors could provide the government with a theoretical and legal basis for persecution of the missionaries.

**Elaboration and Analysis of Three Kinds of Rumors Against Missionaries**

**Rumors About Espionage**

As early as the reign of the Emperor Jiajing (嘉靖皇帝), the acts of aggression by the Portuguese and Spaniards in the areas of Southeast Asia, including Manlajia (滿剌加, Malacca, now areas of Malacca, Malaysia), Sulu (蘇祿), Saltanah Sulu, now areas of the Sulu Archipelago, the Philippines, Meiluoju (美洛居, Moluccas, now areas of Maluku, Indonesia), and Poluoguo (婆羅國, Borneo, now areas of western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia) had already been known to Chinese. As stated by a Ming literati Su Jiuyi (蘇及宇),

“These cunning and deceitful barbarians attacked and occupied every country they came to. Till now, the number of countries that they have occupied amounts to more than thirty. . . It is difficult to trace countries that are far from us, but merely in those close to us, including Luzon (呂宋), Misuoguo (米索果), Zamboanga (三寶頤), Keelung (雞籠), and Tamsui (雞籠), the barbarians killed their kings and controlled their people. Only several of them would be able to occupy one entire country” (Su, 1996, p. 310).

Later, the occupation of Macau by the Portuguese, though officially in the form of a lease, was generally considered a preliminary preparation for invading Guangdong Province and seemed to further confirm their aggressive ambitions. As a matter of fact, the issue of the Portuguese residing in Macau aroused heated discussion among officials at court. One of the arguments of those opposed to the Portuguese was concerns over the Portuguese using Macau as a springboard to launch an attack against Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. For instance, Pang Shangpeng (龐尚鵬), the Censor of Guangdong Province, presented a memorial about expelling the Portuguese from Macau in which he stated, “In recent years, (these foreign barbarians) started to build residences in Macau. Within a few years, the number of residences has risen from hundreds to thousands. They conduct business with Chinese every day and gain great profits from it. . . I have lost count of their houses and the number of foreign barbarians has reached more than ten thousand. . . what if these jackals and wolves changed their minds, pouring into Xiangshan County, dispersing and scattering, gaining control over critical positions, and hastening to the capital city? It would truly be a serious situation that I cannot bear to imagine.” (Tang, 1999, p. 12).

Even Matteo Ricci himself admitted that most accusations against the missionaries in the southern part of China were related to their communication with the Portuguese, and the same situation might arise for the Catholic Church in Beijing (Ricci, 1986, p. 411). Although he tried to conceal the contact between missionaries in Mainland China and Portuguese in Macau to the best of his ability (Bernard, 1964, p. 234), Catholic missionaries who entered mainland China were still considered spies dispatched by the Portuguese from Macau for the purpose of either collecting Chinese geographical and military information or as agents planted for Portuguese military operations against China.

Rumors couched in these terms were those most commonly seen in late Ming China. As early as 1583, when Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci were officially permitted to reside in China for the first time, Wang Pan (王泮), the local magistrate of Zhaoqing, set aside a piece of land next to the Chongxi Tower (崇禧塔), which was under construction at that time, for the missionaries to build residence and church. This decision aroused discontent among the local elites and commoners, and before long rumors against the missionaries started to circulate. Some accused the missionaries of building houses to introduce and accommodate more foreigners and make Zhaoqing a second Macau (Ricci, 2014, p. 98), while others asserted that the houses that were under construction for these foreigners were not residences but fortresses in which more than 40 foreigners from Macau had already been concealed (Ricci, 2014, p. 180). Such rumors circulated so widely that even officials could not avoid its effect. Influenced by Ricci’s records, scholars generally believe that the reason why the missionaries left Zhaoqing for Shaozhou (韶州) in 1589 was because the newly appointed Governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces Liu Jiwen (劉繼文) intended to misappropriate the lands of missionaries to build a memorial temple for himself.
However, according to the newly discovered Lima zhuan (biography of Matteo Ricci), written by a local official of Shaozhou named Liu Chengfan (劉承范), the actual reason that Liu Jiwen expelled the missionaries from Zhaoqing, where the offices of Governor Liu Jiwen were located, was from fear that the missionaries would reveal military operations against the pirate group of Chen Dele (陳德樂) hiding in Macau at that time.

In the later anti-Catholic persecutions, anti-Catholic scholar-officials further employed and manipulated rumors to attack missionaries. For instance, it is recorded by Li Rihua (李日華) that “Due to the fact that recently there were discussions of conducting military operations against Macau, the head of the Portuguese living in Macau dispatched Matteo Ricci to China to gather intelligence” (Li, 2003, p. 292). Yu Maozi (余懋孳) also leveled the accusation against missionaries like Matteo Ricci, Alfonso Vagnoni, and Emanuel Diaz Junior in his imperial memorial during the Nanjing anti-Catholic persecution that “they traveled frequently between Guangdong and Macau and colluded with barbarians living there” (Chen, 2000, p. 720). Another official, Fang Kongzhao (方孔炤), also mentioned such accusations in his memorial by stating, “western barbarians Diego de Pantoja, Sabbatino de Ursis, and the deceased Matteo Ricci traveled a long distance and had been living here for years for reasons that I know nothing of. Some firmly believed that they were actually spies dispatched by barbarians living in Macau” (Fang, 2003, pp. 520–521). In addition, in a public letter presented to Jiang Dejing (蔣德璟), the local elites as well as local military and political officials directly accused the missionaries of being agents planted by the Portuguese for prospective invasions of China.

“They (Catholic barbarians) have already occupied the territories of Luzon, Djakarta, Zamboanga, and Kutoulang, which used to be our vassal states. They also took up Macau, Taiwan, Keelung, and Tamshui as portals through which they planned to invade Fujian and Guangdong Provinces. Once the barbarians outside and inside China act in cooperation with each other, how are we going to defend ourselves?” (Zou, 1996, p. 292).

Such rumors even caused wide-scale collective panic in China, among which the most well-known would be the so-called “Lazarro Cattaneo Incident” in 1606.

In the first 10 years of 1600, the Jesuits and Portuguese in Macau rebuilt the burned St. Paul Cathedral. First, the newly built church was magnificent and mysterious and looked like a fortress to Chinese officials. Second, with the massive gathering of Japanese in Macau during the reconstruction of this church, the local authorities of Guangdong Province were extremely cautious and worried. Meanwhile, due to internal disputes between the Society of Jesus and other Catholic congregations, a rumor was circulated from Macau that the Jesuits were preparing for a rebellion together with Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese in which they planned to kill all the Chinese living in Macau and then invade Guangzhou on the way to conquering all of China. Even worse, a Chinese literatus wrote a book based on this rumor, stating that the Portuguese were going to crown Jesuit Lazarus Cattaneo who had traveled to both Beijing and Nanjing and had profound knowledge of Chinese geographical and military matters. This rumor was not only circulated in Guangdong Province but was even reported to the Emperor Wanli through a memorial (de Gouvea, 1995, p. 207). Influenced by this rumor, a large number of Chinese people evacuated from Macau. The Maritime Admiral of Guangzhou ordered the strengthening of the city’s defense and dismantling of thousands of houses outside the city wall. Moreover, he gave orders to prohibit receiving people from Macau and cut off contact with Macau. This entire incident cooled down only after Guangdong Surveillance Commissioner Zhang Deming (張德明), who was also a friend of Jesuit Nicolas Longobardi, sent investigators to Macau to investigate this affair and dispelled the rumor (de Gouvea, 1995, 2018, pp. 203–212; Ricci, 2014, p. 333).

As rumors circulated widely in the places where missionaries lived and were usually accepted as truth, seriously threatening the personal safety of missionaries and the spread of Catholicism, Catholic missionaries and their Chinese followers had to repeatedly explain themselves in apologetic literature. For instance, Jujie (具揭) is an apologetic work written by Diego de Pantoja and Sabbatino de Ursis during the Nanjing anti-Catholic persecution in order to “refute the rumors created by the enemies so that people can know the truth about the Lord of Heaven and priests” (Ye, 2017, p. 379). This work lists 24 kinds of rumors that were employed to attack missionaries and Catholicism and then clarifies them. Of these 24 kinds of rumors, at least 5 directly related to the accusation of missionaries being spies of Portuguese from Macau, including “China’s defense against barbarians” (或夏之防); “spies dispatched by barbaric merchants from Macau” (香山澳夷商細作); “introducing evil barbarians like Japanese barbarians and black barbarians” (招倭番, 海鬼諸惡夷); “obtaining profound geographical and border knowledge of China after reading large amounts of maps and history books” (盡觀圖史, 識邊境之盈虛, 知山川之險易); and “returning to their native places” (歸籍) (de Pantoja & de Ursis, 1996).

To sum up, with the arrival of Catholic missionaries, the first questions that local residents demanded answers to were the identity and true intention of these newly arrived foreigners. Due to the missionaries and being regarded as “Folangji barbarians” no different from the Portuguese living in Macau, as discussed above, the Chinese transplanted their imagination of the Portuguese coveting the territories of Guangdong Province and hatching sinister plots to invade China onto the Catholic missionaries, regarding them as spies dispatched from Macau by the Portuguese in order to collect geographical and military information and as ready to collude with Portuguese forces from outside when launching military
attacks. Such rumors were further employed and manipulated by anti-Catholic scholar-officials in their persecutions of the missionaries as tactics to arouse the attention of the government and eventually to expel the missionaries from China.

Rumors About Sexual Misconduct

Apart from rumors about espionage, rumors accusing missionaries of sexual misconduct with local women were another kind of widespread rumor encountered in late Ming China. In an analysis of eight aspects of Chinese anti-Catholic sentiments by D. E. Mungello, two of them directly concern the issue of women: seducing women and advocating monogamy and opposing concubinage (Mungello, 2009, pp. 58–59).

In fact, missionaries came to China with a clear understanding of the status of Chinese women. To avoid unnecessary troubles, they decided to develop male converts first and let them develop female converts. Regarding religious rituals, they had to simplify or even omit certain specific rituals that might have caused discontent or suspicion among the Chinese. For instance, “missionaries would set up separate chapels for women and preach to them with rails separating them; during the sacrament, only one child was brought into the church as an assistant while no man was allowed to enter; during unction, missionaries would hold cotton with tweezers instead of their thumb to anoint women, and when administering the last unction, women’s loins and soles would not be anointed” (Zhou, 2002).

Cautious as they were, rumors accusing missionaries of sexual misconduct with local women still cropped up on occasion. The earliest record in this line would be the “Martino Incident” in 1587, 3 years after the settlement of the missionaries in Zhaoping. Cai Yilong (蔡一龍), an impious Catholic convert cheated a father and a son who sought to learn the technique of huangbai (黃白術), and the missionaries for a prism. After being arrested by local officials, he colluded with a local resident, Luo Hong (羅洪), and spread rumors that Michele Ruggieri committed adultery with Luo Hong’s. This rumor was dispelled only after the trial of the missionaries (Ricci, 2014, pp. 123–4126). Nicolas Longobardi experienced a similar event fueled by rumors a few years later when he was in charge of the Catholic Church in Shaozhou (Ricci, 2014, pp. 406–407).

If the rumormongering above was personal acts of extortion against the missionaries, then later events should be seen as collective acts to smear the missionaries through rumors of sexual misconduct with local women. In Hechos de la Orden de Predicadores en el Imperio de la China, a “masquerade” of more than 300 men dressed in Catholic costumes, some disguised as women in Fuan (福安), Fujian Province, was recorded, extremely vilifying Catholicism, missionaries, and their Chinese converts. The highlight was a scene acted on stage in which a character disguised as a woman knelt before a phony friar. She supplicated to him for baptism and got undressed under his instruction. They acted out the story of the Virgin Mary and ridiculed the idea of being pregnant while remaining a virgin. The phony friar then made the woman a beata so that he could cuddle her and engage in other obscene behaviors with her (Menegon, 2009, pp. 59–60).

Moreover, rumors in this term can also be found frequently in the anti-Catholic literature in late Ming China. Their descriptions are vivid, as if they had seen the events with their own eyes. Su Jiyu (蘇及宇) used to claim in his anti-Catholic literature that “Philters were hidden in their churches. They took women’s conversion as a sign of trust, touching women’s breasts and private parts as a sign of conversion, and sexual intercourse as a sign of marriage. They demonstrated women’s evil sorceries to enhance their confidence and firm belief” (Su, 1996, p. 180). Another anti-Catholic literatus, Huang Tingshi (黃廷師), made the similar statement that “whether married or not, the beautiful women would be picked out either to do household work in the church yard or to serve Liaooshi (寮氏, Jesus) and were sexually assaulted by the priests” (Huang, 1996a, p. 176).

In fact, rumors about the sexual misconduct of religious personages with women were not an invention of anti-Catholic opponents in late Ming China. Long before the arrival of Catholic missionaries, such rumors had already been widely deployed against Buddhists.

The secularization of Buddhism in the late Ming dynasty severely weakened the sanctity of religion in China. Buddhists actively participated in secular affairs to make a living, and the violation of Buddhist percepts was a common occurrence, sharply undermining the image of Buddhists. For instance, the term esu sengni (惡俗僧尼, evil and vulgar monks and nuns) became the most common image of Buddhists in the novels of the Ming dynasty, where they usually appear as greedy and erotic characters (Tian, 2012). The wide circulation of the term yinseng (淫僧, erotic monks) in Ming novels is the most striking example of this term. Among all the descriptions of the image of licentious Buddhist monks, the most famous and widely-circulated would be the doggerel in the novel Shuihu zhuan: “To describe the Buddhist monks with one character is seng (僧, monk); with two characters is heshang (和尚, Buddhist monk); with three characters is guileguan (鬼樂官, obscene amusement master); with four characters is sezhongegui (色中鬼, sexual-appetite demon)” (Shi & Luo, 2005, p. 600). Thus, even Buddhism, a religion that had already been introduced into and profoundly modified in China for more than 1,000 years, establishing its orthodox status after the “Combination of Three Religions” movements during the Song dynasty could not avoid the distorted imagination of sexual misconduct, let alone the newly introduced Catholicism. When people saw or simply heard of such phenomena as female believers walking in and out of churches, listening to sermons, receiving Catholic rituals like baptism,
and even taking vows of chastity and celibacy for the Lord of Heaven, they naturally transplanted the distorted erotic image of Buddhists onto the Catholic missionaries as they spread rumors of missionaries engaging in sexual misconduct with Chinese women. In addition, as stated by the anti-Catholic literatus Zhong Shisheng (鍾始聲), “the missionaries preached sexual abstinence and celibacy, but they actually lured silly men and women into conducting obscene behaviors privately through the absurd doctrine of holy water” (Zhong, 1965, p. 945). Rumors of sexual misconduct placed the missionaries in a position in sharp contrast to their self-claimed image of “sexual abstinence and maintaining celibacy for the Lord of Heaven,” leading to even stronger destestation against missionaries as well as heightening anti-Catholic sentiment among the Chinese.

Even worse, with the spread of such rumors, they were gradually manipulated by officials as the crime of “men and women indiscriminately mingling together” (男女混雜) which became one of the significant bases underlying the heterodox image of Catholicism in their anti-Catholic memorials or official proclamations.

In a study of the White Lotus tradition in the history of China, Professor Barend ter Haar pointed out that the term báilian jiao (White Lotus Teaching), despite the similarity of its name with the White Lotus Movement in the Song and Yuan dynasties, had already become a term in political discourse in the Ming dynasty, and the construction of the discourse of heterodoxy represented by the White Lotus Teaching in imperial China was achieved through the usage of “labels” or “stereotypes” (Liu, 2020)—and the term “men and women indiscriminately mingling together” is exactly one of the stereotypes employed by officials to derogate religious beliefs that were incompatible with the official ruling order. Therefore, through rumors and accusations of “men and women indiscriminately mingling together,” the anti-Catholic scholar-officials attempted to equate Catholicism with illegal Chinese secret societies like the White Lotus Teaching or the Non-Action Teaching, which were also usually accused of the crime of “men and women indiscriminately mingling together” and placed in the same category of heterodox teachings. Thus, as stated in the official proclamation of the Provincial Surveillance Commission after the Fujian anti-Catholic persecution, “I have always been told that the heterodox teaching (Catholicism) is hard for the people and the situation is getting even worse. It prevents people from worshipping their ancestors and its members mingle together regardless of sex. Nothing is more unethical than that” (Xu, 1996, p. 132).

**Rumors About Performing Sorceries**

During the famous Nanjing anti-Catholic persecution in 1616 and 1617, Wu Ercheng (吳爾成), the head of Libu zhuke qinglusi (Bureau of Reception, Ministry of Rites 禮部主客清吏司) wrote an official letter to the Nanjing duchayuan (Censurate of Nanjing 南京督察院) about the transfer of recently captured Jesuit Alfonso Vagnoni and Alvaro Semedo. Wu charged that “they (Catholic missionaries) discussed *tianxing* (天性, heavenly nature) with literati, and *shenshu* (神術, divine spells) with commoners” (Wu, 1996, pp. 78–79). This is actually a precise observation of preaching strategies adopted by Jesuits in late Ming China. It is generally acknowledged that Jesuits first adopted a so-called “upper-class strategy” which concentrated on efforts to convert Chinese scholar-officials by way of conducting cultural accommodation to Confucianism. However, what is rarely mentioned is that in the meantime, they also paid great attention to the evangelization of Chinese commoners through the narration of miraculous tales of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and Catholic saints.

Previously, for the sake of emphasizing Jesuits’ role as the forerunners of cross-cultural communication between China and the West, “they were usually depicted more as disseminators of Western culture and scientific knowledge in China and as transmitters of Chinese knowledge to the Western world in histories of the Jesuits’ mission in China. Therefore, their cultural accommodation to Confucianism, which highlighted a spirit of mutual understanding and respect of indigenous culture in cross-cultural communication, became the most intensively and extensively studied subject in research on the preaching strategies adopted by Jesuits in Ming China. However, this does not show the whole picture of Jesuit missionary work, as it only recounts Jesuits’ efforts of evangelization among the Chinese ‘upper-class’, while the vast majority of converts in Ming China were commoners, ‘lower-class’ individuals, not scholar-officials.” (Sun, 2019, p. 85)

The very first works emphasizing “the prominent role played by faith—faith in the Lord of Heaven’s superior power to exorcize demons, foretell the future, and inflict or heal diseases” (Zhang, 1999, p. 5) in Jesuit missionary work in Ming China are Gernet (1985) *China and the Christian impact: A conflict of cultures* and Zurcher’s (1985) “The Lord of Heaven and the demons: Strange stories from a late Ming Christian manuscript.” Zhang Qiong further pointed out that “the discourse about God, demons, and miracles had never been peripheral to the Jesuit scheme of conversion but instead occupied a central role both in their daily encounters with the Chinese and in their scholarly publication” (Zhang, 1999, p. 5).

In actual fact, the missionaries were never shy to display their ability to exorcize demons, inflict, or heal diseases, or pray for male heirs to the Chinese once they arrived in China. This deeply rooted the image of missionaries, represented by Matteo Ricci, as *shushi* (術士, warlock or sorcerer) in Chinese culture. Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道), one of the leaders of the popular “Gong An School” (公安派) in the literary circles of the late Ming dynasty, commented that, “Matteo Ricci was adept at argumentation and writing scholarly works. He did not have much income, but still usually gave
away other houses and servants, so people suspected that he possessed alchemical secrets like Wang Yang (王陽), a famous shushi of the Han dynasty. He actually knew many occult things, but it was a pity that I did not delve into it” (Yuan, 1989, pp. 1200–1201). Moreover, Li Rihua, who met Matteo Ricci personally, similarly remarked: “Matteo Ricci was able to perform occult ceremonies so that no one could do any harm to him; he was also good at the occult of expiration and inspiration so that he was immune to any kind of disease” (Li, 1993, pp. 13–14). Indeed, in Kuaiyuan (繪園), a representative novel of mystery and the supernatural in the Ming dynasty, its author even classified the biography of Matteo Ricci to the category of immortals and illusions together with such figures as Li Fuda (李福達), Zhang Pique (張皮雀), Yin Pengtou (尹蓬頭), and Yan Pengtou (閻蓬頭), who were all regarded as shushi and legendary immortals, showing that the image of Matteo Ricci as a shushi was deeply rooted in his mind (Qian, 2003, p. 597).

Although the image as shushi was of great convenience to their missionary work in the very beginning, the marginal cultural position of the shushi in imperial China was always rejected and despised by the mainstream culture of the upper class. In a study of some typical “strange stories” in the history of China, Professor Barend ter Haar suggests that the best and most convenient way of dealing with the collective fear and panic aroused by these stories was to find scapegoats (Haar, 2006, p. 26). Shushi, together with other marginalized groups of people, including wandering beggars, vagrants, monks, and fortune-tellers, were most easily regarded as scapegoats. Therefore, when identifying themselves as shushi, Catholic missionaries immediately replaced the previous marginalized groups and became the new scapegoats of various “strange stories.” In this way, it is not difficult to understand the emergence, circulation, and manipulation of rumors about missionaries able to perform evil sorceries.

The anti-Catholic work Quyi Zhiyan records a rumor in this term.

“Its teaching (Catholicism) is not only erroneous, but also full of sorceries. They buried the deceased in churches. Fifty years later, they dug out the corpses and cremated them into oil by virtue of sorceries. The oil was then distributed to five churches and anyone who stepped into the church would be anointed oil on his (her) forehead so that he (she) would become numb and follow their teachings” (Huang, 1996a, p. 176).

Moreover, in the local gazetteers of Shanhua (善化), it is recorded that “During the reign of Emperor Tianqi (天啟皇帝), Diego de Pantoja, who was adept at the occult, was able to snatch the kidneys of men and the wombs of women to use as ingredients in medicine” (Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 2002, p. 22a). Previously, stories about snatching human organs for use as ingredients in medicine were widely circulated in the history of imperial China, many of them even being recorded in the official histories. For instance, in Jiu Tangshu (舊唐書), it is recorded that “in the 9th year of Dahe (大和, 835), there was a rumor that was widely circulated in the capital city. According to this rumor, for the purpose of making the everlasting elixir, Zheng Zhu (鄭注) asked for the capture of little children because he wanted to use their hearts and livers as raw materials. After the wide circulation of this rumor, people hid and locked their children at home and the entire society was in chaos” (Liu, 2010, p. 1375). Stories such as this became a favorite topic of novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The most well-known example in this line should be the story in Xiyou ji ( Journey to the West, 西遊記) in which an evil Taoist persuades the king of a small country to use the hearts of 1,111 children as ingredients for medicine (Wu, 1995). This record apparently transplants the distorted image of religiously based evil sorceries that used human organs for medicine onto the missionaries, accusing them in turn of performing such acts.

In addition, the authors of many anti-Catholic works created terms such as yaoyi (妖夷, demonic barbarians) or liyao (夷妖, barbaric demons) to refer to missionaries. For instance, they called Matteo Ricci liyao (利妖, Ricci demon) and Giulio Aleni as liyao (艾妖, Aleni demon) to further strengthen their images as performers of evil sorceries.

As a matter of fact, the spread of rumors about performing sorcery can be seen as efforts by anti-Catholic scholar-officials to provide the government with the “legal basis” for its persecutions of missionaries. First, the term shiwu xieshu (師巫邪術, sorcerers and evil sorceries) per se is directly listed in Daming Lv (大明律) as a strictly prohibited clause, any violation of which would be severely punished (Huang, 1979, p. 589). Thus, spreading rumors about missionaries performing evil sorceries provided the government’s suppression and persecution of missionaries a legal basis.

Second, spreading rumors was of vital importance in the construction of the heterodox-teaching image of Catholicism. In their studies of the construction of the discourse of heterodox teaching in imperial China, both Professor Barend ter Haar and Doctor Wu Junqing emphasized the usage of “labels.” The three salient labels of heterodoxy put forward by Professor Barend ter Haar are “assembling at night and dispersing at dawn,” “men and women indiscriminately mingling together,” and “eating vegetables and serving the devil,” while the three labels adduced by Wu Junqing are “practicing black magic,” “spreading messianic messages,” and “politically subversive” (Wu, 2016a, p. 3). Both “eating vegetables and serving the devil” and “practicing black magic” are simply variant expressions and manifestations of performing evil sorceries. Therefore, both agree that the accusation of performing evil sorceries was indispensable in the construction of the discourse on heterodox teaching in imperial China. This can be further evidenced by the repeated appearance of accusations of the crime of “performing evil sorceries” in documents dealing with issues of Chinese heterodox
teachings such as White Lotus Teaching and Non-Action Teaching. In this way, by spreading rumors of Catholic missionaries performing evil sorceries, anti-Catholic scholars tried to create a heterodox image of Catholicism and sought to classify it into the same categories as other Chinese heterodox teachings. Since Chinese heterodox teachings were strictly prohibited and suppressed by the imperial government, the government had precedents to follow in its persecutions of Catholicism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focuses on one specific phenomenon—rumor in the persecutions against missionaries in late Ming China. As one of the most efficient approaches of arousing collective fear and hatred among local residents against Catholic missionaries, rumor functioned as the most convenient yet effective weapon in persecuting them. Through the analysis above, we can see that three types of rumors were significant in the launch of anti-Catholic persecutions in late Ming China. On the one hand, the initiation and circulation of rumors about the identities and real purposes of missionaries were collective efforts of local residents to make sense and manage risks in an unstable and uncertain social environment with the arrival of foreign missionaries; on the other hand, when the development of the Catholic Church started to challenge the existing social order and the power of local elites and local officials over local societies, they intentionally manipulated rumors against missionaries to isolate and stigmatize the outsiders, strengthen the social order based on interpersonal relationships, and reaffirm their social status, power, and prestige.

People from different social layers played their own roles in the initiation, circulation, and manipulation of different types of rumors. Generally speaking, commoners were the main initiators of all kinds of rumors in the very beginning for the sake of making sense and managing risks. Besides, in the eyes of local elites and officials, such “psychological mass” was the perfect target of manipulated rumors. Local elites as the actual rulers over local societies, were the main manipulators of rumors. To them, the incoming of foreign missionaries and the introduction of a brand-new religion that differed from Confucianism was a severe threat and challenge to their ruling position in local society. Therefore, they were the most active participants in the manipulation of rumors either for instigating commoners or arousing the cautious attention of officials against missionaries. Local officials were a bit complicated. In the very beginning, they usually acted as protectors of missionaries as they would deal with rumors that involved missionaries with impartial judgment. However, with the fast development of Catholicism and the more obvious similarities shared between Catholicism and Chinese heterodoxy teachings in terms of ceremonies and organization and activity patterns, local officials gradually became the major manipulator of modified rumors that were directly borrowed from local elites in attacking missionaries.

In the various rumors against Catholic missionaries, different images of them were constructed, in which the working mechanism of imagination transplant played a significant role. Through the example of missionaries’ image as children abductor and eater, we can see that after the arrival of Catholic missionaries, local residents immediately projected their inherent collective fear of all kinds of Chinese mystery stories of abducting and eating children onto them and transplant the imagination of Portuguese abducting and eating children onto them as well. Even worse, some suspicious activities of missionaries, particularly those related to children like building foundling asylum to adopt children and baptizing the dying children contributed to the construction of missionaries’ image as children abductors and eaters and accelerated the imagination transplant process.

The deployment of rumors in the persecutions of missionaries in late Ming China also offers a paradigm for subsequent anti-Catholic or anti-Christian persecutions. Whether in the Calendar Case in the early Qing dynasty, the prohibition of Catholicism during the reigns of the Emperors Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing, or the various vigorous “anti-foreign religion movements” of the late Qing dynasty, we can always see the phenomenon of opponents of missionaries spreading inflammatory rumors to arouse public anger. Lars Laamann has conducted an intensive research in this regard in his monograph Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China: The Inculturation of Christianity in 18th and Early 19th Century China. In this book, Laamann insightfully examined the phenomenon of Catholicism being labeled as “heretical” by Chinese officials from 1,724 when Chinese court officially prohibited European missionary activities. The entry point of his research is rumor. He argues that in the year of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, Catholics has “successfully accommodated their faith with the popular trials of healing and black magic, exorcism, matrimony, and filial piety.” (Laamann, 2007) which in turn became one of the most common inducements for various rumors against them. Besides, other factors like the ethnic and banner identity, also entered into the “rumor mills” as the Qing government implemented more severe policies to persecute missionaries. Situation has worsened by the end of Qing dynasty when the missionaries became the main target of the so-called anti-foreign invasion movement. At this point, rumors against missionaries became even more severe as the type of rumor demonizing missionaries became more popular and more widely accepted by Chinese from local commoners and local elites. Rumor played a decisive role in almost all major anti-Christian persecutions for this period. For instance, the anti-Christian persecutions in Yangzhou (揚州) in 1868, in Tianjin (天津) in 1870, in Wuhu (芜湖), Danyang (丹陽), Wuxi (無錫), Wuxue (武穴), and Yichang (宜昌) in 1891, and in Chengdu (成都) in 1895 were all directly triggered by rumors (Su, 2001, p. 3).
Therefore, the study of these three kinds of rumors will not only afford us a better understanding of the rise and development of anti-Catholic persecutions in late Ming China, but also provide another perspective for the study of the confrontations and conflicts in the early stage of cultural exchange between China and the West.

Authors Note
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