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The Selection and Reorganization of Religious Narrative: The Pictorial Adaptation of the Evangelicae Historiae Imagines in the Tianzhu Jiangsheng Chuxiang Jingjie

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Abstract

This article examines how Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie, a late-Ming Catholic illustrated book associated with Giulio Aleni, adapted Jerome Nadal's Evangelicae historiae imagines. Through comparative visual analysis and documentary research, it considers narrative selection, Chinese-language titles, pictorial details, and the transition from European copper engraving to Chinese woodblock printing. In the 50-image narrative sample drawn from the Harvard University Library copy, 10 images depict Christ's birth and early life, 26 focus on preaching and miracles, and 14 represent the Passion and Resurrection. The distribution makes Christ's public ministry especially visible within this sample, although it does not by itself establish a difference in emphasis from Nadal's work. The comparison also identifies changes in captions, figure design, interior decoration, linework, and spatial representation. Some features may have offered Chinese readers familiar points of entry, but similarities with Buddhist or Daoist forms do not independently prove deliberate borrowing or a specific audience response. The article argues that the Chinese publication retained the broad framework of the Gospel narrative while reshaping its presentation through linguistic interpretation, visual adjustment, and the practical demands of woodblock printing. By distinguishing observable changes from hypotheses about editorial intention, it offers a cautious account of religious-image adaptation in the late-Ming context.

Keywords

Tianzhu Jiangsheng Chuxiang Jingjie; Evangelicae Historiae Imagines; Late-Ming Catholicism; Religious Imagery; Narrative Adaptation; Cultural Transmission

1. Introduction

From the late sixteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionary work in China combined texts, images, and the exchange of knowledge. For

audiences with limited familiarity with Christian scripture, images could make biblical figures and events visually accessible. Late-Ming Catholic illustrated books therefore operated as religious narratives and as products of cross-cultural communication and print culture.

Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie, printed in Jinjiang, Fujian, during the Chongzhen reign and accompanied by a preface by Giulio Aleni, drew substantially on Jerome Nadal's Evangelicae historiae imagines, published by Christophe Plantin. The works share many figures, events, and compositional structures, yet differ in captions, details, and pictorial treatment. The change from European copper engravings to Chinese woodblock prints adds a material dimension to these differences.

Previous scholarship has explored the book's editions and textual history, its localization of Catholic imagery, Confucian elements, and the wider context of Jesuit communication. Zou Xiaoyun studies the work as a whole; Qu Yi examines Confucian elements; and Wang Xiliang discusses the visualization of God, missionary communication, and the Jerusalem map. Building on this research, this article focuses on the narrative relationship between the Chinese publication and Nadal's work. It considers three connected dimensions: the distribution of biblical subjects, the interpretive effects of titles and pictorial details, and the visual changes associated with woodblock printing.

The study combines comparative image analysis with documentary research. The Harvard University Library copy of Tianzhu jiangsheng yanxing jixiang (天主降生言行纪像; shelfmark 52–1049) serves as the principal visual witness, while the Bavarian State Library copy (shelfmark Sin.23) provides a point of comparison. Images are matched to Nadal's work through biblical event, principal figures, composition, and caption information. The Harvard copy contains 51 images; its frontispiece portrait of Jesus is excluded from the sequential narrative, leaving a 50-image sample for subject distribution. The Jerusalem map found in some other editions is treated separately. This sample is an analytical basis, not a claim that every surviving edition contains the same images. Where correspondence is uncertain or an image appears only in a particular version, the difference is recorded cautiously rather than automatically interpreted as deliberate deletion or editorial intent.

2. The Pictorial Model and Edition Differences: Premises of the Comparison

Evangelicae historiae imagines presents the life of Jesus through a sequence of images, captions, and accompanying texts. Its 153 principal images broadly cover Christ's birth and early life, public ministry, Passion, and Resurrection. The sequence supports both the presentation of Gospel events and devotional reflection; the images therefore form a narrative structure rather than a set of unrelated

illustrations.

Aleni's preface refers to sacred events of Christ's Incarnation engraved in Western copperplate, indicating awareness of the European visual tradition. The Chinese illustrations retain many source compositions, but they are not exact reproductions. Captions, local details, figure presentation, and spatial treatment vary, while the change in printing medium affects the rendering of lines and tonal contrast.

Edition history complicates the comparison. Surviving copies appear under different titles and have been counted differently. Some are described as containing 56 images plus a Jerusalem map, while copies titled Tianzhu jiangsheng yanxing jixiang are often counted as containing 51 images. Totals can vary according to whether a frontispiece portrait, map, or appended image is included. This article therefore distinguishes narrative images from portraits and maps. The Harvard copy provides the numbering base, and image correspondences are established by content and composition rather than by assuming that numbering is identical across editions. Edition variation is essential to interpretation: a missing image or a change in sequence cannot be attributed to cultural strategy without further evidence.

3. Adjustments in Subject Distribution: The Prominence of Jesus's Public Life

Within the 50-image sample, the narrative is divided into three broad phases: Christ's birth and early life (10 images), preaching and miracles (26), and the Passion and Resurrection (14). Public ministry is the largest category in this sample. These figures describe the internal distribution of the selected Chinese images; without a corresponding classification of Nadal's 153 images on the same basis, they cannot by themselves prove that the Chinese version gives public ministry greater emphasis than the European source.

The distribution nevertheless helps explain how the Chinese narrative presents Jesus. The book retains the broad sequence of Christ's life while including numerous episodes in which he teaches, heals, restores sight, enables the paralysed to walk, and raises the dead. Such events communicate religious authority through visible action. Bodily posture, the reactions of onlookers, and the outcome of an encounter can make a story recognizable even to readers with limited access to its theological background.

Preaching scenes offer a different visual structure. Gesture, orientation, and the arrangement of listeners make the relationship between teacher and audience legible. Late-Ming readers were familiar with lectures, moral instruction, and religious teaching, so the general form of a speaker addressing a group may have been recognizable. This resemblance could provide an interpretive point of entry, although it cannot establish how particular viewers understood the images.

The prominence of miracles and preaching should not be taken as a weakening of the Passion and Resurrection, which remain part of the book's Christian narrative.

Rather, within this limited sample, scenes of action and instruction give the narrative a rhythm in which Jesus' deeds and teaching are especially visible. Whether this pattern resulted from a deliberate editorial plan requires further comparison of image sequences, captions, other writings by Aleni, and historical records.

4. Miracles and Preaching: The Intelligibilization of Religious Narrative

Miracle narratives often follow a visually clear sequence: a person experiences illness, impairment, or danger; Jesus intervenes through speech or action; and an extraordinary outcome follows. A single image can compress this change into posture, gesture, and the relationship between Jesus and other figures. In healing scenes, blindness, paralysis, or illness may be indicated by bodily position, while recovery is suggested through standing, changed gaze, or the reactions of witnesses. Captions identify the event and its participants, allowing visual cues and text to work together.

These images may have resonated with late-Ming experiences of illness, poverty, and uncertainty. The story of the rich man and Lazarus, for example, presents poverty, suffering, and posthumous recompense in ways that could connect with contemporary concerns. Yet the possible resonance of a story must be distinguished from evidence of actual audience response. Claims that a particular image caused conversion or reached a specific social group would require missionary records or other historical documentation.

Buddhist, Daoist, and popular religious traditions also included narratives of healing and sacred efficacy. This shared narrative form may have made miracle stories more readily recognizable, but it did not make their theological meanings equivalent. In the Christian narrative, miracles point to Jesus' identity and God's power within salvation history. Similarly, preaching scenes might have recalled lectures or moral instruction without making Christian teaching identical to Confucian ethics. Familiar social forms could help readers recognize what was happening while the story retained its distinct religious content.

Miracles and preaching thus work together: one makes power visible through action, while the other presents teaching through speech and social interaction. Both translate religious ideas into scenes that can be viewed, narrated, and remembered. This communicative potential is a plausible explanation for their prominence in the selected image sample, though the precise editorial reasons remain open to verification.

5. Titles and Visual Details: How Indigenous Culture Entered Religious Images

Titles and explanatory texts play an important role alongside the images. A concise

title directs attention toward a particular aspect of the event and can frame interpretation before the viewer studies the composition. The Chinese publication's localization therefore operates through language as well as visual design.

The title "Xi jia ji shui hua zhong" (西加汲水化众), associated with Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John, offers one example. The phrase "hua zhong" (化众) may recall Buddhist expressions concerning the guidance or transformation of sentient beings. It frames the episode as an act of teaching or moral influence and may have made the story more accessible through familiar Chinese religious vocabulary. This is a possible semantic association, not proof that the title was intentionally derived from a Buddhist source.

The term "tianshen" (天神), used in the caption for the birth of Jesus, raises a related question. It may have evoked familiar ideas of heavenly beings, but lexical resemblance alone cannot establish a Daoist origin or a deliberate merging of religious systems. Further comparison with Aleni's other writings and contemporary Chinese religious texts would be needed to determine the term's range of meaning.

The frontispiece portrait of Jesus also differs from the corresponding European image in gesture and facial appearance. The hand position and the round object held in the left hand may invite comparison with Buddhist iconography, while the fuller and calmer face changes the figure's visual impression. These observations identify possible associations; the object's symbolism and the significance of the gesture require confirmation through the source image, captions, and relevant iconographic evidence.

Interior decoration provides clearer evidence of visual adjustment. In scenes such as "The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" and "The Washing of the Disciples' Feet," columns, screens, landscape paintings, bamboo-and-plum motifs, and gridded floors differ from the European model. These elements place biblical events in settings that may have been more familiar to Chinese viewers. They can also serve compositional functions, organizing the image and strengthening contrasts. Cultural associations and practical design considerations may coexist; individual details should not be assigned a single meaning without further evidence.

Taken together, titles, figure design, and furnishings altered the conditions under which readers encountered the story. The biblical events remained recognizable, while Chinese-language interpretation and local visual details offered possible points of connection with late-Ming experience.

6. The Woodcut Medium and Visual Form: The Material Conditions of Adaptation

The transfer from copper engraving to woodblock printing shaped the appearance of the Chinese images. Copper engraving can use dense, fine lines to create tonal gradation, volume, and spatial depth. Woodblock printing required the source

images to be recut through a different process, affecting line direction, density, black-and-white contrast, and the retention of detail. Consequently, similar compositions could produce different visual effects.

The Chinese publication nevertheless preserves features of the European model. Hatching is used to render interiors, figures, and landscapes; in "The Parable of the Sower," for example, distant scenery is organized through dense linear patterns. This suggests an effort to retain aspects of the source's visual language while adapting them to a different medium. Woodblock printing did not require the complete abandonment of European techniques, although it changed how they could be reproduced.

Perspective reveals the difficulty of this transfer. In some scenes, architectural spaces imitate linear perspective, while floor tiles, walls, or other planes do not consistently follow the same system. Examples include "The Conception of St John the Baptist," "The Wedding at Cana," and "The Woman Who Was a Sinner." Such inconsistencies could reflect the process of recutting, uneven familiarity with European perspective, different spatial conventions, or specific aesthetic choices. They do not, on their own, demonstrate a deliberate rejection of Western perspective.

Woodblock printing was well established in Ming publishing and provided a practical means of reproducing text and images. Its use may have supported the production and circulation of Catholic books, while its material properties shaped their visual form. The medium should therefore be understood both as a vehicle of transmission and as a condition of adaptation.

7. Narrative Adaptation and the Late-Ming Missionary Context

The comparison points to three connected levels of adaptation. Subject distribution makes miracles and preaching prominent within the 50-image sample; Chinese titles and selected pictorial details provide potential interpretive links with local language and visual experience; and the shift from copper engraving to woodblock printing changes line, tonal contrast, and spatial representation. Together, these features show that the Chinese publication adapted a European visual model through narrative, language, and material production.

This process fits the broader context of Jesuit efforts to communicate Christianity through Chinese language and familiar forms of knowledge. Illustrated books could complement textual explanation by presenting events visually, while titles and captions guided interpretation. Localization should therefore be considered through the organization of stories and the viewing process, as well as through decorative features.

The causes of individual changes, however, must be stated cautiously. Aleni's preface and other writings can illuminate missionary priorities, but they do not necessarily establish who selected, redrew, carved, or approved each detail. Book

production involved multiple stages and possibly multiple contributors. It is more secure to describe visible differences than to assign every change to Aleni's personal intention.

Nor did localization erase the distinction between Christian and Chinese religious traditions. Familiar words, gestures, or furnishings may have encouraged recognition, but the figures, events, and accompanying explanations continued to refer to Christian narratives. Such familiarity could facilitate understanding while also introducing ambiguity. The images provided several possible routes into the story, but they cannot establish that all viewers interpreted them in the same way.

8. Conclusion

Tianzhu jiangsheng chuxiang jingjie adapted Nadal's Evangelicae historiae imagines through subject organization, Chinese-language interpretation, pictorial adjustment, and the transfer from copper engraving to woodblock printing. In the 50-image sample, scenes of preaching and miracles form the largest category, making Christ's public ministry highly visible within the Chinese narrative. This distribution should not be treated as proof of a stronger emphasis than Nadal's work until both image sets have been classified on a consistent basis.

The comparison also identifies potential cultural associations in titles and visual details, alongside changes in interior decoration, linework, and perspective. These features may have helped place Christian stories within a recognizable late-Ming visual environment, but claims about deliberate Buddhist or Daoist borrowing, editorial strategy, and audience response require additional evidence. Technical constraints and edition variation must remain part of the explanation.

The article's main contribution is to bring narrative distribution, linguistic framing, and print medium into one comparative framework while separating observed differences from hypotheses about their causes. Further research should establish a complete image concordance listing the image numbers in both works, corresponding biblical events, edition variants, and reasons for inclusion or exclusion. Broader comparison with contemporary religious texts and Aleni's writings would also help clarify the origins and meanings of particular terms and images. For now, the evidence supports a cautious conclusion: the Chinese publication retained the broad Christian narrative while reshaping how it was presented under late-Ming linguistic, visual, and material conditions.

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