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CHINESE CHRISTIAN ART: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND SACRED ART IN CHINA DURING THE EVANGELIZING MISSIONS (16TH TO 20TH CENTURIES)

Àngela Altisent Altisent
Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Asia Oriental

Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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Contacto editorial

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Asia Oriental
Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia

Edifici E1
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès) Barcelona
España

Tel: + 34 - 93 581 2111
Fax: + 34 - 93 581 3266

E-mail: gr.interasia@uab.cat
Página web: http://www.uab.cat/grup-recerca/interasia

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Chinese Christian Art: Christian faith and sacred art in China during the evangelizing missions (16th to 20th centuries)

Àngela Altisent Altisent

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Resumen

En el siglo XVI llegó a China la primera ola de evangelización oficial cristiana. Se realizará una revisión y análisis bibliográfica para determinar cómo el contexto del cristianismo y su producción artística durante las misiones evangelizadoras (siglos XVI-XX) contribuyeron a enraizar la religión en China, cuestionando la definición de la fe y el arte cristianos. Este artículo alega que el dilema de la adaptación religiosa y de su arte sacro deriva de sus vínculos con una autoridad restrictiva. A medida que éstos se desvanecen a causa de la construcción moderna de la individualización, también amplían sus definiciones.

Palabras clave:
China, arte, cristianismo, arte sagrado, inculturación

Abstract

In the 16h century Christianity's first wave of formal evangelization reached China. A literature review and analysis of Christian religion and its art in China will be conducted, to determine how the context of Christianity and Christian art production during the evangelizing missions (16th to 20th centuries) propitiated to root the religion to China, challenging the definition Christian faith and art. This article argues that the problem of adaptation of religion and its sacred art is a by-product of its links with limiting authority. As those faint due to the modern construction of individualization, so do they extend their definitions.

Keywords: China, Art, Cristianity, Sacred Art, inculturation

CHINESE CHRISTIAN ART: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND SACRED ART IN CHINA DURING THE EVANGELIZING MISSIONS (16TH TO 20TH CENTURIES)

Àngela Altisent Altisent
Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

This article's aim is to analyse the situation of Christianity and Christian art production in China during the evangelizing missions from the 16th to 20th centuries. To reach it, it is important to revise the history of the Christian religion and its art in the territory today known as the People's Republic of China (*zhonghua renmin gongheguo* 中华人民共和国), as well as acknowledging the role of national and international politics and worldwide organisations, such as the Christian Church, to the practice of Christian devotion and its portray to artworks and religious productions. In this article the term Christianity will be used to embrace all of its forms, historical and current, and to avoid discriminating between belief systems arising from the same scriptures and basic theological arguments.

The Christian religion first reached the Tang's Empire 617-907) capital Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) in 631 by a Persian believer called Aloben, in its Chinese transcription. It was one branch of Eastern Christianity spread under the Sassanid dynasty of Iran (225-651): Nestorian Christianity or the Church of the East. It became known in China under the names of "religion of the sacred texts of Persia" (*bosi jingjiao* 波斯景教), "religion of the great Qin" (*daqin jingjiao* 大秦景教), or "Luminous Religion" (*jingjiao* 景教). Christianity was among

the "Three Persian Religions" (*sanyijiao* 三夷教)[1] and was granted an imperial edict permitting its establishment, preaching and the construction of Christian churches. However, it was soon banned during the purge of foreign religions in 842-845, as a result of a nationalistic rejection to everything foreign (Lippe, 1952: 123-124; Godwin, 2018: 203-208; Gernet, 199: 255-265; Wang, 2006: 149-151).

It was not until the early Mongol conquests of 1220 propitiated stable and safer routes to travel to Asia, that trade along the Silk Road played a major role in spreading Christianity to China. This early globalization resulting from the commercial interconnection already present in the region around the 1st century BC, became a global meet-point which expanded across the steppes and Central Asia, and had a far wider impact than the physical transport of material goods. The establishment of trade routes resulted in the circulation of people, images, beliefs and thoughts, all of which came into contact with Chinese society, as trade routes spread both on the mainland and by sea. The Vatican's first embassies to the Mongols arrived during this period comprising diplomats, and Franciscan missionaries such as Father John of Montecorvino, Odoric of Pordenone and Giovanni de Marignolli, whose main goal was to evangelise and win converts in the new territory. However, those missions were modest and limited and came to an end by 1350 due to a number of developments such as the decline of the Mongol Empire, and the rapid propagation of

[1] The three religions originated in Persia, which were spread in China and protected by the ruling Tang dynasty: the above-mentioned Luminous Religion (*jingjiao*景教), Zoroastrianism (*xianjiao* 祆教) and Manichaeism (*mingjiao* 明教).

black death[2] (Ristuccia, 2013: 172-189; Rubiés & Ollé, 2016: 260-268; Habig, 1945: 22-24; Rubiés, 2005: 191-256).

China was out of reach till the sixteenth century. As the demise of land trade routes started to make place for the extended maritime routes, many evangelising missions –such as Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Jansenists and Protestants- came to Chinese shores, creating a first wave of evangelization tied to a central Christian hierarchy. Their evangelistic efforts connected the Chinese region to Christian orthodoxy. This article will attempt to examine how this new context of interaction since the Jesuit missionary efforts (16th and 17th centuries), which propitiated to root the Christian religion to the territory, as well as its artistic depictions.

During Christianity's first encounters with China most of the artistic representation of Christian imagery was given within a commercial framework involving the production of goods to be exported abroad. The most remarkable product in this trading network is the famous Chinese porcelain, due to China's long tradition of pottery. Chinese workshops developed pieces with European decorations, and even accepted commissions from western monarchs. Thus, there are many examples of porcelain of Chinese production which was produced for export and adopted Christian decorations as a lure for European buyers. It was art but secular, produced for commercial purposes in a process of imitation and adoption of cultural symbols disconnected from their meaning, and used purely for their aesthetics (Finlay, 1998: 142-184).

The significance of art acquired relevancy along with the advance of the evangelistic missions, as it was an instrument to

[2] A deadly pandemic, also known the Plague, which affected Eurasia and northern Africa from 1346 to 1353.

make the preached religion accessible and understandable, in order to reach the masses that were intended to be converted. Producing religious art in China became then necessary to provide elements of worship to the new believers. Consequently, Christian art took on a new meaning, not just as a mere commodity to be exported, but as sacred art to be worshipped.

The research for this article will focus primarily on addressing the specific issue concerning the adaptation and accommodation of Christianity in China's evangelisation missions, and the artworks arising from the intersection between European Christian art, Chinese literary art and Chinese Christian art. Therefore, although religion is the starting point of this article, art is also an important variable chosen to study its impact on the Chinese region. Hence, the research questions of this article interact between the concepts of identity (Chinese or Christian) and the dynamics between sacred art and its political and cultural legitimacy. It hopes to bring to the fore the following issues: “Is it possible to be Chinese and Christian?”, and "What makes art Christian?”.

First evangelising missions: The Jesuits and the Chinese rite’s controversy

The decision to send Christian missions in China under the mandate and protection of the Pope dates back to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The religious war divided the faithful but also diminished the influence of the Pope (Mungello, 1999: 15-16). At the same time, the stablished trade routes not only brought material goods to Rome, but also reports of Christians in China (Gernet, 1999: 255-256). These were the circumstances which led to the Catholic Counter-Reformation, by which Catholic missionaries were sent out throughout the world to assist the Pope, compensating the believers lost in

Europe and spreading the faith along the newly established trade routes. After the 1300s land routes were no longer safe, the missionaries mainly used the sea route across Indian ocean. Many Catholic groups such as Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and others, intended to reach China to extend their missions. However, the first group to finally gain access and stablish renewed diplomatic relations with the Asian authorities were the Jesuits, through a strategy of cultural accommodation (Ristuccia, 2013: 189; Mungello, 1999: 15-16).

The conversion of the pagans was also the main idea behind Ignatius of Loyola's founding of the Jesuit order in 1534 (Gernet, 1999: 402). His close collaborator Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was the leader of the mission in the East, leading the evangelist mission in Japan. He never actually entered mainland China but he inspired later Jesuit missionaries, such as Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). Ruggieri was the first to settle in China. As a strategy to ensure his survival and permanence in the country, he adopted Buddhism as a way to reach the believers easily, pretending that Christianity was one of its variants. Christianity and Buddhism, both religions of salvation coming from the West, had indeed many similarities. Yet the missionaries soon realised that choosing to resemble another foreign religion was not the best way to win the favour of the ruling classes. While Buddhism and Taoism were the most widespread teachings, these were mainly followed by the masses and the Jesuit's intention was to be granted an Imperial permit to establish a permanent Christian mission in China (Golden, 2009: 377; Gernet, 1999: 404-405; Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 269; Cervera Jiménez, 2002: 211-216).

The 1582 arrival of Ricci in Macau brought a significant ideological shift to the Sino-Jesuit approach. Ricci seized upon the end of the Ming dynasty's nationalist turn and claims of a

return to the origins of Confucian ethics. Said interpretation was only possible due to Ricci's assumptions on Confucianism thought. He interpreted Confucianism as a collection of rational social guidelines regarding ethics and morality –secular non-idolatrous philosophy. Therefore, he considered it to be defending certain intrinsic values to human nature which might be acceptable within Christianity. On this basis, Ricci developed a Christian interpretation based on Confucianism, encouraging his fellow Jesuit missionaries to pursue a path of cultural accommodation: Christianity through a Confucian lens. Hence, to seek imperial patronage and acceptance, the Jesuits adopted the aesthetics of Confucian literati and served in the Emperor's court as astronomers, surveyors, chemists, musicians, architects and artists (Rubiés, 2005: 242-244, 257-273; Cheng, 2006: 487-488; Mungello, 1999: 17-19; Cervera Jiménez, 2002: 220; Clarke, 2016: 154).

However, such adaptation was also difficult. The Jesuit missionaries faced great cultural challenges in a society and civilisation quite different from their own. Its historical references, mental schemes, behaviours and customs did not have the slightest similarity (Gernet, 1999: 405). These problems, which the missionaries attempted to solve by cultural accommodation, ended up confronting the various creeds and involving the authority of the Chinese Emperor as well as that of the Vatican Pope in the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy. The controversy was a consequence of the adaptation, which some viewed as distortion, of the religion to fit a foreign culture and society. The question was whether it was possible to adapt a religion in order to gain followers, and whether these followers could finally be considered truly Christian by following an adapted faith (Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 271-272; Mantecón Sardiñas, 2014: 139-145). One example of such efforts to salvage the problem of cross-cultural transfer, is the question of God's name.

Ricci's studies about Confucianism led him to believe it could serve as the basis for introducing the Christian concepts to the Chinese. He was looking to translate theological concepts such as *Deus, anima* or *angelus* ("God", "soul", "angel"). For the term "God", Ricci took the existence of the terms 上帝 (*Shangdi*, Sovereign on High),[3] 天 (*Tian*, Heaven)[4] and 天帝 (*Tiandi*, Sovereign of the Sky), as proof that there was some kind of natural disposition to monotheism in ancient Chinese though. Therefore, he urged Jesuits to use the term 天主 (*Tianzhu*, Lord or Master of the Sky) as synonymous of *Shangdi* and *Tiandi* to refer to God. As he understood it: "they were just different names for God". Ricci used these terms as equivalent and title his best-known Chinese book of 1604 as 天主实义 (*Tianzhu Shiyi*, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven). On the other hand, the term 'soul' found some etymologically challenges. Niccolo Longobardi (1559-1654), another Italian Jesuit and sinologist, questioned Ricci's understanding of Confucian culture. As he understood, Neo-Confucian cosmology was based on two principles: 理 (*li*, form, principle), and 气 (*qi*, the essence of all things). *Qi* is fluid and can take various physical forms without losing its attribute, like water. It could be compared to the Aristotelian concept of "substance" or "matter"; and *li* to Aristotle's concept of "form". However, etymologically qi corresponds to the European concept of "energy". Thus, there was no distinction between matter and spirit in Chinese culture, and there were no equivalent concepts for anima or angelus. Longobardi proposed to use phonemic transliterations of Latin terms in a strategy that would deliberately highlight the difference between Christian and

[3] Term used to designate the supreme god during the Shang dynasty.

[4] Term used from the Zhou dynasty onwards. It is more impersonal and admits further interpretation depending on whether it refers to a supreme god or to the physical heaven.

Confucian terms. Thus, he suggested *anima*, the Latin term for "soul", to be transliterated as 亚尼玛 (*yanima*)*; Deus* as 徒斯 (*Tusi*) or 耶和华 (*Yehehua*, Jehovah); and Jesus as 耶稣 (*Yesu*). Longobardi's proposal was completely opposed to the cultural accommodation of Ricci, and it advocated to the uniqueness and foreign differentiation of Christian thought, arising controversy within the mission and the Chinese imperial court (Golden, 2009: 377-384; Cervera & Martínez Esquivel, 2018: 258-259).

Another central issue of the controversy concerned the Confucian virtue of filial piety 孝 (*xiao*) (Cervera & Martínez Esquivel, 2018: 254-255). Characterised in its Chinese character as an elderly person with a walking cane being carried over an infant's shoulders, filial piety represents the social obligations within the family and society. It creates a pyramid-like power structure out of which are drawn three basic social fiduciary relationships: sovereign-subject, husband-wife and parent-child. It implied obedience to parents, and by extension to the Emperor, the father of the Empire. And it also included the cult to the ancestors, creating a problem about the conception of power and pagan faith (Luengo Gutiérrez, 2012: 72-74; Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 271-272). One example regarding the cult to the ancestor can be found in the issue of the spirit tablets, regarding the funeral practices. The rituals surrounding the spirit tablets were a widespread practice mixed with Taoism and Buddhism, along with other popular believes. It was a central element of the cult to the ancestors. It was found in domestic sanctuaries (*jiatang* 家堂) –reserved to immediate family- or in the ancestral halls (*citang* 祠堂) – common to higher-status families and dedicated to the memory of distant relatives. As missionaries discovered the rituals, attempted to Christianise the altars and the ceremonies. However, neither the funeral crosses nor the stones were particularly popular. The popular belief was that the spirit of

the dead resided in the tables and they must be honoured by particular ceremonies. As the attempts to Christianise the rituals were infructuous, the missionaries discussed its prohibition.[5] However, the Emperor favoured the rituals in 1700, and declared them to be civil celebration, and therefore, beyond the influence and interference of religion (Luengo Gutiérrez, 2012: 72-81; Rubiés, 2005: 242).

Formal discussions regarding the Chinese Rites Controversy began around the 1630s, when the first Dominican and Franciscan missionaries arrived in China from the Philippines (Mantecón Sardiñas, 2014: 134). Jesuits advocated for the adaptation of essential Catholic doctrines and practices to Chinese religious customs. Not allowing a syncretic view would have forced converts to choose between being a good Christian and a good Chinese subject. Failure to fulfil filial duties was to be a disrespectful son and a rebel to the Chinese socio-political order (Cheng, 2006). Yet the other creeds (Augustinians, Dominicans and Franciscans, as well as dissident Jesuits) feared that adapting Christianity would eventually dilute Catholic orthodoxy (Rubiés, 2005: 275-279; Luengo Gutiérrez, 2012: 72-73; Mantecón Sardiñas, 2014: 139-145). It was a difficult choice between the expansion or the status quo of Christianity. Finally, the Pope decided to condemn the Chinese rites in 1704, while the Qing Emperor declared non-accommodated Christianity to be a "heterodox religion" (*xiejiao* 邪教),[6] i.e. at odds with traditional norms and

[5] Another case example is of how the Christianizing missions clashed with local practices is the case of Philippines matrimonial practices in late 17th to 18th century. The case is studied by Camacho 2022's article "Understanding and Regulating Bridewealth and Brideservice in the Spanish Colonial Period of the Philippines."

[6] The label of heterodoxy was used in opposition to orthodoxy to determine whether a religion was considered disloyal or subversive, that is to say,

practices, and expelled its missionaries (Golden, 2009: 384-385; Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 79; Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 272-274; Lippe, 1952: 124).

Two coexisting styles of Christian art

As already described above, Jesuit artists in China aspired to win the Emperor's favour in order to establish a Christian mission in Chinese territory under official patronage. Hence, Jesuits served at court and became part of the administration to secure the establishment of the first Catholic communities throughout the territory. One of the positions they held was that of imperial artists (Lippe, 1952: 124-126; Clarke, 2016: 154).

Castiglione and other Jesuit priests serving as painters were at the forefront of an artistic interaction between the West and China. The artistic influence of Asian textiles, porcelains and lacquerware was widely valued in the West, as they became prized exotic items. Yet Ming and Qing dynasty paintings did not enjoy the same popularity. Jesuit painters at court even attacked them for lacking perspective and substance (Lippe, 1952: 124-126; Finlay, 1998: 168-170).

What the Jesuits were in fact pointing out was their alienation from the Chinese pictorial tradition. Chinese artists were deeply influenced by philosophy, as they were literati. Daoism, as one of the philosophic traditions in which they trained, introduced the concept of non-interference, or non-action (*wu wei* 无为),[7]

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intolerable to the Emperor and to Confucianism authority. It considered how religion affected the daily life of a proper Chinese subject, and its influence on Chinese traditions and the authority of the Emperor.

[7] Characteristic of Taoist tradition, it implies to stop thinking before acting, to do nothing against the natural course of things. Reacting to the natural

an important factor for understanding their artistic production. The philosophy contains the concept of being and not being (you /wu 有/无),[8] a correlative couple, such as Yin and Yang (*yin yang* 阴阳),[9] in an example of constant exchange, of permanent change. Change is endless, nothing remains the same forever. Therefore, what is referred to as "no perspective or depth" was in fact the Chinese artists' representation of the Taoist vacuum concept. This emptiness, a defining characteristic of the landscape tradition (*shan shui* 山水), is not an empty space but a representation of continuity and multiple possibilities (Jullien, 2009: 2-6). As Jullien (2009: 44-45) argues, Western modern artists always demand representation, the depiction of a determined form, whereas landscape paintings place more importance on the stroke, on simplicity, following a multi-perspective in which absence is also a part of the presence, a kind of continuity.

Such issues were not extensively explored and debated by the Jesuits. Their main objective at court was to gain favour with

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world, letting oneself be guided by actions in an instinctive and natural way, as opposed to the artificiality of conscious action.

[8] A correlative pair which acknowledges that everything changes and nothing remains the same forever. There is presence (有) and absence (无). Things are, and later won't be, in an endless cycle. The concept follows the concept of impermanence of the Taoist tradition.

[9] Yin and Yang are a correlative pairing, two non-exclusively related opposites. Yin and Yang represent two qualities that are in constant change and interrelation. Yang is the presence of something and Yin is the absence of something. Yang 阳 literally the sunny side of the mountain - represents the masculine, the high, hard, the presence of something. Yin 阴 - literally the dark side of the mountain - represents the feminine, the low, soft, the absence. Whether an object belongs to Yin or Yang depends on the point of view, since absence (Yin) exists from the context of presence, and in the absence of presence. There is no dichotomy or exclusive relationship, most typical of western thought: black and white, good and evil.

the Chinese rulers. Therefore, in order to avoid antagonising the Emperor, they included little religious content in their paintings, which evolved to resemble the Confucian pictorial tradition through the inclusion of landscapes, animals, flowers and even records of historical events (Clarke, 2016: 154-155). Thus, detached from the act of preaching the Christian faith, secular artworks were produced to serve the Emperor, and Chinese artists who embraced the Christian faith alongside the Jesuits continued to adhere to the traditional Chinese painting. A noted example was the painter Wu Li (1632-1718). He was baptised under the name of Simon Xavier and eventually entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Macao in 1682, and in 1688 became the first Chinese citizen ever to be ordained as a Catholic bishop. Despite his achievements in the Western faith, his paintings had little to no Western influence. As shown in fig. 1, they resembled the ancient landscape tradition (Lippe, 1952: 126-127).

While their work at court was kept discreet, missionaries imported works of art from Europe that were overtly religious in content. Their primary objective was to assist in the faith propagation to evangelise China, as well as to provide new Christian communities and potential converts with elements of worship. The mass distribution required these imported paintings to be recreated in China, which is why the works were copied in Christian art workshops by artists trained in these artistic techniques. One example of a Chinese artist who helped the visual propagation of Christianity is Jacques Niva (Ni Yicheng, 1579-1638), who worked assisting the Jesuits in painting Chinese chapels and churches (Clarke, 2016: 154-155; Clarke, 2013: 5).

Figure 1: Mountains and River landscape, Wu Li. (ca. 1703).
Private collection (Lippe, 1952)

Among the Christian images which reached China, the one which gained the most admiration and followers was the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus. By contrast, Jesus Christ's crucifixion scene was not widely accepted and was rarely depicted in places of worship and works of art. The Crucifix, often used in the West as a way of explaining the concept of salvation, was considered scandalous in China. The Chinese avoided the depiction of physical suffering in art, and considered that the nudity of Christ in his final moments, along with his death as a convicted criminal posed a moral challenge to the Chinese public. Thus, it was avoided so as not to lower the respect He deserved. Also, the cross itself caused a problem of translation, due to its visual resemblance to the character of the number ten (*shi* 十). This cultural clash was, however, bridged with the Marian images due to their connections with the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin (观音), the goddess of mercy (Rubiés, 2005: 240; Golden, 2009: 379; Cervera & Martínez Esquivel, 2018: 259-260; Cervera Jiménez, 2002: 228-238; Lawton, 1995: 475, Clarke, 2013: 5; McCall, 1948: 48). Marian images are one of the clearest examples of the process of indigenisation. Chinese Christian communities came to develop a strong devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, which contributed to the widespread creation of artistic production and personal devotion items with her figure, as well as the establishment of shrines and cathedrals in her name. Such devotion can be related to the feminine aspect of the Virgin Mary, a motherly compassion and protection figure to which believers turned in times of persecution and hardship (Clarke, 2013: 8-11).

The attempts to accommodate the new cults by including local designs in Christian artistic production gave rise to a particular dilemma. This attempt to create a Chinese-style Christian art involved the introduction of local styles and techniques, as well as the depiction of Mary with Chinese features, costumes and

scenery. The practice of incorporating non-Christian motifs or altering them was widespread, and aroused tensions over what constitutes an appropriately Christian Chinese image. There was strong opposition to these new images, questioning their "authenticity", or even their "viability" as true expressions of worship. It was a debate between the preservation of an ancient tradition and identity versus a newer, more experimental, local model, which responded to the propagators' desire to imagine Christian divinities that resonated more closely with their Chinese worshippers. Both sides had Chinese and Western advocates in their ranks. While some defended the cultural accommodation of the artworks as a strategy to reach the masses, others strongly opposed the depiction of Chinese characteristics, arguing that the artwork was part of an international Roman Catholic community and could therefore dilute or bastardise the overall community's image (Clarke, 2013: 8-11; Clarke, 2016: 156-162).

The Papacy withdrew of favour of accommodation manifested with the gradual removal of the Society of Jesus delegates, beginning in Europe in 1759, and it was confirmed in 1742, when the Pope enacted a decree against the arguments of the Jesuits. The news of the Pope's final decision to supress the order in 1773 did not reach the Chinese community until 1774. Together with the condemnation of the Chinese rites and the Emperor's involvement in 1704, marked a period of uncertainty, danger, and decline of the Jesuit mission in China, leading to the eventual decline of the influence they enjoyed in the Chinese Empire (Shore, 2020: 49-53; Rubiés, 2005: 260; Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 272). The Chinese syncretistic style particularly flourished when the Jesuits fell out of favour with the Emperor and the Pope, easing religious control and guidance in the territory. Chinese followers scattered across the territory in small communities, which continued their faith often in isolation from the international communities. However,

in the years following the collapse of the Qing empire and the formation of the Republic of China, a new Christian mission attempted to embrace the possibilities of cultural accommodation (Clarke, 2016: 156; Lawton, 1995: 470-473).

Modern missionary initiatives and social uprising (19th-20th centuries)

The controversy and expulsion of the Jesuits was not, however, the end of Christian missions in China, nor of its interaction with the West. In fact, such relations became more complicated due to the new maritime trade routes, trading rhetoric and imperialist expansion policy.

From the 7th to the 16th century, trade was transacted between China, the South Asian region, India and the Middle East, China's great spheres of influence. The existence of these trade networks allowed products from China to reach the West and awaken its interest, encouraging the trade route to expand to also include the West, along with the European colonial settlements in the Americas and Africa (Finlay, 1998: 165-170).

Once the East India Companies, first the Dutch (VOC) and later the British (EIC), succeeded in establishing a direct commercial relationship with China, the consumption of exotic products such as tea and porcelain began to have a huge cultural influence. Their enormous popularity in Western societies had consequences that eventually modified gastronomic conventions and elite aesthetics (Finlay, 1998: 168-170; Hanser, 2012: 67-68). The most important consequence, however, was the dependence and negative trade balance it brought to the British Empire. The Qing Empire adopted the Single Whip tax reform, which imposed silver as the main method of payment for trade between Europe and Asia during

the 15th and 16th centuries, when the dollar or silver peso from New Spain came via Canton and Fujian. Such a situation promoted the acquisition of territorial rights in Bengal by the British East India Company and the massive export of opium in Chinese ports, as a counterbalancing commodity for the commercial exchanges (Bowen, 2010: 445-446; Gernet, 2018: 473-478; Rowe, 2009: 122-174; Permanyer-Ugartemendia, 2014: 156-157).

Thus, a commercial network was established between the three countries of the Asian trade triangle, Britain, India and China, preluding the so-called Opium War (1839-1842). The war ended in 1842 with The Treaty of Nanjing, which laid the foundations for unequal relations between the Western powers and China (Permanyer-Ugartemendia, 2014: 156-157; Gernet, 2018: 477-476). The Treaty of Nanjing included, among other conditions, the handover to the British of the ports of Amoy, Shanghai and Ningbo as well as Canton. It was precisely in these western-controlled ports that Christian missions continued to operate (Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 304-311; Liu, 2010: 78).

Some of the missionaries who experienced the rites controversy remained after choosing between expulsion for challenging the Emperor or excommunication for defying the Pope. These missionaries were the ones who decided to follow the Jesuit path of cultural accommodation. Among them there was Giuseppe Castiglione, who served the Imperial court as a painter until 1766 (Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 272). However, the missionary presence was not limited to Catholics, as Protestants also had a significant role to play. One of the first Protestant missionaries to travel to China was Robert Morrison in 1807, from the London Missionary Society. Protestant missionaries were involved primarily with education, propagating religion as well as spreading knowledge about the

West. However, their reach was much more limited than their predecessors', as they faced much stronger opposition. They were most influential in the treaty ports, but also suffered from the negative association the treaties held among the Chinese population. Christianity was associated with the unequal treaties and national humiliation, as well as with local rebellion movements which took place at the time (Lippe, 1952: 124; Schirokauer & Brown, 2006: 328- 329).

The most prominent of these rebellions was the Taiping Rebellion (太平; 1850-1864), due to its destabilising effect on the Qing Empire. Their leader was Hong XiuQuan (洪秀全; 1814-1864), who failed the imperial examinations needed to gain access to the Imperial administration. He came into contact with one of the Chinese versions of the Bible propagated by Protestants such as Robert Morrison. Hong reinterpreted these scriptures, merging Christian concepts with the Chinese tradition, in a process of sinicization of the Christian faith in China. This new-found faith led him to organise a rebellion that set out to restore the "proper worship" of the Christian God, challenging the Emperor's "mandate of heaven" as a self-proclaimed spiritual leader (Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 119; Spence, 2011: 256-258; Golden, 2004: 108-109).

Taiping advanced across China attacking local cults, temples, and ritual networks. Yet their main purpose was to expel foreigners from China, whom they referred to as demons. It was a compound of the concept of "demon" in the Bible and the term Chinese used to name foreigners, "overseas demons" or "Western demons" (*xiyang guizi* 西洋鬼子). It is significant how a syncretic movement that integrated Christian and folk elements of Chinese thought advanced through the provinces of central and southern China. They came to rule Nanjing for 11 years under Hong's authority as self-proclaimed King of

Heaven, disrupting Qing authority (Spence, 2011: 257-262; Meyer-Fong, 2015: 1724; Huntington, 2005: 62).

Despite the rebellion being finally suppressed in 1864, it still contributed to anti-religious discourse in the late Qing. However, even when major anti-Christian riots emerged throughout the country in the 1870s (Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 81, 189), this opposition failed to stop Christian missions. The Vatican established relations with the Nationalist Party after the fall of the Qing empire in 1911 and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1927. The end of the Qing left a power vacuum and intellectual discontent, which set the perfect environment for the Church to retake their mission in the region. However, the rise of nationalism in China—instigated by the humiliation of unequal treaties, as well as the foreign protectorates' control over Chinese territory—limited the Catholic Church's free access and action. Under these conditions, the Catholic Church reconsidered its opposition to cultural adaptation in the Asian context from the twentieth century onwards (Lawton, 1995: 470-472; Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 83-85).

While the Qing dynasty was collapsing by the late 19th century from both internal and external challenges, a period of political and social transformation began in order to transform China into a modern state. The Empire adopted Western education and issued scholarship contracts between China and Western countries, to send their youth to study abroad. As a result, a growing number of new generations of intellectuals became into contact with the modern western currents of thought. Especially after the country's weakness in the face of external attacks such as the Opium War became apparent, the intellectual youth were able to reflect on the problems of their country and came together to call for modernity. The known as overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 华侨) called for reform of the

economy and its socio-political institutions (Zhang, 2017: 103; Golden, 2003: 4-8; Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 48).

One of these men was Chen Duxiu (陈独秀, 1879-1942), who first published the magazine "New Youth" (*xin qingnian* 新青年) on 15 September 1915 in Shanghai. The magazine and the debate it introduced marked an era since the publication of Chen Duxiu's article "Call to Youth" (*jinggao qingnian* 敬告青年), in which he exposed the problems China was suffering from and blamed traditional culture for it (Zhang, 2017: 104-106, Selgas Cors, 2014: 355). Chen (1915(1): 1-6, cited in Zhang, 2017: 106) wrote: "In modern history, Europeans were ahead of other cultures because of their advanced science and technology. [...]We –Chinese-, if we want to free ourselves from being a chaotic country and are ashamed of being citizens without knowledge, we need to pursue it and take science to the same level as rights".

The publication of the magazine, and the large participation of intellectuals in its redaction, laid the foundation for the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动). The movement emerged in 1919, in the same period as the May Fourth Movement uprising (*wu si yundong* 五四运动),[10] as a reaction by young Chinese intellectuals[11] towards a country –China– they felt was not changing or advancing at an adequate

[10] The uprising followed the Treaty of Versailles, signed after the end of the First World War in 1919. China collaborated actively in the war alongside the victors, but did not receive any compensation due to its weak international position. That was not the case of Japan.

[11] Most of the intellectuals following the movement had studied abroad. They were first sent to Japan, and eventually also studied in Europe and the United States.

nor sufficient pace. Following the path of Chen Duxiu's “Call to youth", the movement aimed to break with tradition and move towards a modern country which promoted democracy and science, while also being interested in communism.[12] They believed it was precisely the lack of modernity which made China weak and vulnerable to foreign humiliations (Zhang, 2017: 107; Selgas Cors, 2014: 302).

The New Culture Movement successfully pushed for several major transformations in Chinese society, including the simplification of Chinese characters. It promoted a linguistic reform that would bring written Chinese –classical or traditional Chinese (*wenyanwen* 文言文)– closer to the oral language –the vernacular (*baihuawen* 白话文)– by simplifying the structure of the characters. A great advocate of this reform was Hu Shi (胡適 1891-1962), who in 1917 published in the magazine "New Youth" about the importance of what we know today as the simplification of the written language –simplified Chinese. Other prominent reformers of society collaborated with the magazine, such as Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881-1936), considered the founder of modern Chinese literature, and the early leaders of the People's Republic of China, including Mao Zedong (毛泽东 1893-1976). Their main common ground was their urge to reform the country towards modernity in order to strengthen its international position (Zhang, 2017: 107-110).

It was one of the great periods of influx of foreign ideas, in which also the new art currents made a strong comeback in the territory, influencing the national pictographic styles. Many Chinese painters started to train in oil and explored alternative

[12] Chen Duxiu advocated to apply Soviet Marxism to China. Chen saw in Russia a mirror to China’s situation, as he understood both to share predominantly agrarian and “backward” societies (Zhang, 2017: 108).

pigments and techniques (Lin Ci, 2010: 160-161). It is also relevant to note how the modern concept of religion was exported by colonialism and reinterpreted as part of China's late 19th century modern nation-state building process (Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 6-9). The notions of modernity which arrived to China were also burdened with rationalism and Western enlightenment. The space of religion was one of the affected by the changing environment. In the 1920s, when the Nationalist Party took power, there was a movement to ban "superstition". Called the Smashing Superstition Movement (*mixin dapo yundong* 迷信打破运动), it considered all religious activities to be premodern and urged to destroy idols. Along with the Smashing Superstition Movement it was also launched the Convert Temples to Schools Movement (*miaochan xingxue yundong* 庙产兴学运动), to promote the confiscation of temples to build modern schools and educate the masses. The process called for many contradictions. In 1915, the first president of the Republic of China Yuan Shikai (袁世凯, 1859-1916) already stipulated that temples should not be confiscated or eliminated, and the renovators of society found resistance from local believers. However, the most important contradiction comes with the same definition of the enlightened modern state, which guarantees freedom of religion while advocating for the forsaking of premodern superstitions. From the Japanese Meiji era of modern reformation, the Chinese imported the distinction between religion and superstition in a dichotomy of "primitive" vs. "modern". Then, it began a process of reform and institutionalisation of religions to become modern, and to fit into the construction of the modern state (Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 9, 48-52). In this changing environment, the Church reconsidered the importance of cultural accommodation in the region, as it feared that if they did not participate in the ideological debate, they might find themselves excluded from the new and growing society and the mission of evangelising China would be lost (Lawton, 1995: 470-471).

In 1919, Pope Benedict XV (1914-22) came to favour an eventual ecclesiastical administration by ethnic Chinese clergy, and sent a delegation in 1922 to establish direct communication with the ecclesiastical and political leaders of the new Republic. Celso Benigne-Louis Costantini (1876-1958) acted as delegate, gathering Chinese believers in Shanghai to challenge the religious power of missionary leaders operating independently from the Vatican's influence. They continued the work begun by the Jesuits but sought a middle ground whereby they could address the Chinese population without compromising the Christian faith. The Church declared they would not compromise on matters of doctrine, but could accommodate Republican nationalist claims and foreign anti-interventionist concerns by reducing Western control over the faith in China. For that purpose, it sought to increase the ethnic Chinese clergy, ordaining Chinese priests to the episcopacy and enabling them to administer their own prefectures (Ashiwa & Wank, 2009: 83-85; Clarke, 2016: 156; Lawton, 1995: 470-472).

Pope Benedict XV sent Celso Benigne-Louis Costantini (1876-1958) to China in 1922 to implement this new policy, which was particular in its intention to evangelise using artistic accommodation. Visual reinforcement provided by religious images served positively to reinforce and promote the missionaries' teachings, and their use was widespread. For the Chinese in the early 20th century, however, it was proposed to use art yet in another way, to shift the Chinese public's perception of Christianity. Thus, Costantini was sent to promote Chinese Catholic art, and to establish a School of Painting whose aim was to tie Chinese pictorial tradition together with Christian iconography. It was an aesthetic compromise which was necessary to ensure the future of the Christian movement in Chinese society, but limits were set. The aim was to reduce the negative perception of the religion

and its sacred art—which was reviled as foreign—by incorporating local art styles and imaginary. But Costantini himself advocated moderation (Lawton, 1995: 470-472; Clarke, 2016: 156).

Costantini was favourably inclined towards artistic accommodation due to his own beliefs about Christian art orthodoxy. He believed that, for the sake of historical accuracy, depictions of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ should be Semitic, rather than Chinese or European. Thus, he granted a certain degree of liberty to the new Chinese Cristian painters, whom were expected to convey the Christian spirituality with some native visual familiarity. He was of the opinion that features should not be changed to resemble Chinese, and that it was enough to adjust the background setting, or at most, clothing. Among the artists who best exemplified the kind of visual balance that Costantini wanted to achieve was the painter known as Lukas Chen (*Chen Yuandu* 路加陈, 1902-1967), as it can be seen in his work “The Annunciation” (see fig. 2). Other artists of the School adopted styles that differed in their adoption of Western pictorial techniques or guidelines, adhering to traditional Chinese perspective and pictorial tradition. A clear example is Lu Hongnian's (陆鸿年, 1919-1989) "Seeking Shelter" (see fig. 3), which is clearly reminiscent of landscape painting (*shan shui* 山水), with a focus on landscape rather than human figures (Lawton, 1995: 471-477).

Figure 2: “The Annunciation”, Lukas Chen. 1941. (Lippe, 1952)

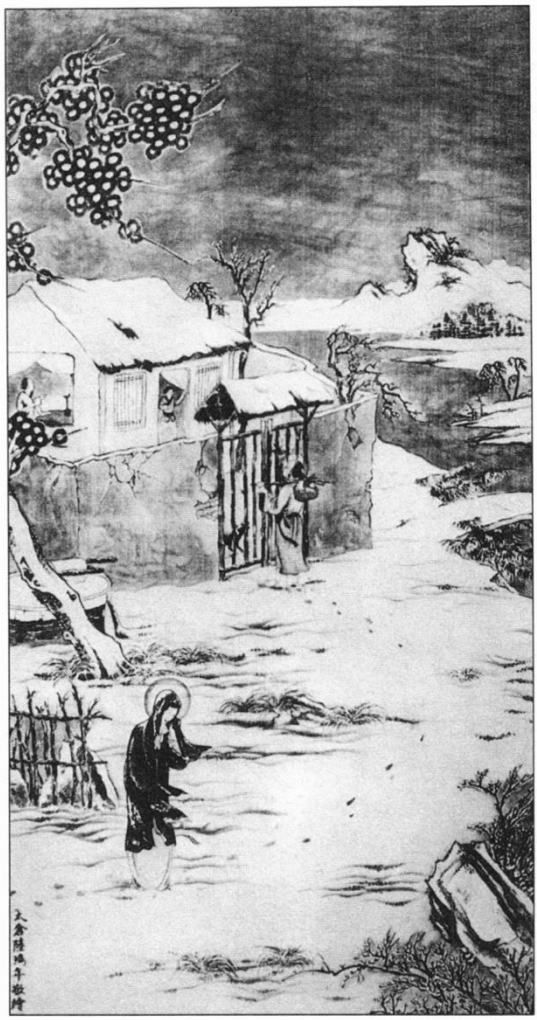

Figure 3: “Seeking Shelter”, Lu Hongnian. 1935. (Lippe, 1952)

The success of the mission and collaboration with Chinese artists was short-lived, however, and did not have time to take hold. Its development, despite its institutional support, was not without debate. As discussed above, certain factions in both the West and China criticised the resulting artworks for not being

sufficiently Christian or "authentic" (Lawton, 1995: 480-481). As Clarke (2016: 160) neatly puts it: "If it does not conform to the idealized style, then the new work is regarded as heterodox". Though the debate did little to bring stability to the artistic project initiated in China, the final catalyst of the end of the mission was the outbreak of the Second World War and the Chinese civil war which culminated in a Communist triumph.

Conclusion

Thorough human history, religion and art have been two closely related concepts for their implications in the ideological construction of the popular masses. Their definition and implementation have followed and shifted alongside institutional convictions and discourses. They served as a fluid entity which mirrored major social and political transformations, both internationally and locally, changing while interacting with the context of the region in question. Hence, the following research questions were defined to analyse such a dynamic relation together with issues of communal identity and institutional guidelines: "Is it possible to be Chinese and Christian?", and "What makes art Christian?".

"Is it possible to be Chinese and Christian?"

In order to answer the question whether "is it possible to be Chinese and Christian" it is necessary to first address what is considered to be "Chinese", and "Christian". Christianity was imported to China as a foreign religion and artwork tradition under rigid institutions, concepts and authorities, already stablished in the West. Therefore, it posed a problem of translation and adaptation in a foreign society and thought system. Since the arrival of the Jesuits, it encountered problems of interpretation which were attempted to be salvaged by cultural accommodation. Such an evangelistic strategy was

chosen in order to attempt to tolerate certain Chinese practices and thus avoid the impossible dilemma of converts being Chinese and Christian at the same time. Considering that "Chinese" was the Imperial subject who adhered to Confucianism and observed filial piety as the highest ethical value, to be a subject of the Emperor and a Christian under the protection of God were mutually exclusive. Filial piety placed loyalty to the Emperor at the pinnacle of society while Christianity was answerable to Christian institutions and ultimately to God.

The definition of what it is to be a "Christian" is not merely related to being a believer, but also to being a subject bound to a central hierarchy, an authority. Thereby, as the self is subjected to the definition of a higher power, so are one's beliefs. This situation translated into an impossible choice between two different ruling entities –between owing allegiance to God or to the Emperor.

Being both Chinese and Christian becomes a problem as one's beliefs are not disconnected from the social and political organization. Achieving such a balance was a challenge for the evangelising missions in China, which modified and adjusted certain aspects of religious orthodoxy in order to apply them locally, whilst observing the governmental system and the traditions and practices present in the territory. It was difficult to maintain two contradicting, even overlapping, systems without diluting or distorting either one of them. Therefore, whether it is possible to be Chinese and Christian depends on such distortion and its personal and official acceptance, as faith can be experienced communally, under the acceptance of the authorities; or individually, by disconnecting from imposed institutional narratives.

What the evangelising missions sought to do was to import religion into the mainstream, and that was not possible, as it meant challenging the authority. After the fall of the Qing empire, in times of building a new system and country, and the calls for modernisation, being Christian and Chinese becomes possible. It was an era of change, new ideas and rapid construction of a new society, in which the Church and the missions attempted to stay in the game in order to be part of the dialogue. Breaking with traditions and adopting new trends was not as problematic as it had been for the imperial subjects. However, the outbreak of civil war and the communist triumph cut short any possibility of such a scenario developing over time, as Maoism posed another conflict for free worship.

To sum up, it is possible to be Chinese and Christian, but there are many definitions of how to accomplish said balance, not always free from criticism and political and social persecution.

"What makes art Christian

Then what makes art Christian? Once again, it is necessary to consider first some definitions. If art is understood as sacred art, intended for worship and an act of faith, then it goes alongside the definition of being a Christian, in defining a Christian believer in China, as discussed above. Christian art was imported as a practical tool to provide visual samples and elements of worship to the new converts. It was consequently linked to the institutional definition of religion and its purpose for the region.

During the time of the Jesuits in China, cultural accommodation was chosen in an attempt to tolerate certain Chinese practices necessary for their social and political context, but it led to a heated controversy over whether those two categories –"Chinese" and Christian"– should ever be combined, a controversy transferred to art. The purity of

Christianity and its depictions in an international adherence to a single orthodox narrative clashed with localism, which wanted to bring Christianity closer to the regional context in order to render it more accessible to its potential converts. As a result, two parallel systems of representation emerged. Here is where questions arise: "What makes art Christian? Which of the two, or both, should be considered as such? Or even "Should there be a controversy between the two aforementioned co-existing artistic styles when, as Lawton (1995) has argued, a probably more accurate depiction of Christ would be Semitic rather than Chinese or European? Furthermore, should the discussion focus on pictorial techniques or ethnic representation, rather than on the message itself? Perhaps art is to be Christian if the artist's faith motivates its creation, regardless of the technique and style chosen to create it.

Therefore, it is conceivable that there is no single definition of what Christian art is and should be. Religious practices and sacred artistic productions have generated multiple fronts, far from constituting a monolithic bloc, presumably due to the direct connection of believers and artists to the institutions and, ultimately, to their interests.

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