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# JESUIT PAINTING IN CHINA BETWEEN 1582 AND 1644: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE

## 1582至1644年耶稣会士绘画在中国的发展： 文化与精神交流的案例研究

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores artistic, cultural, devotional and spiritual aspects of the first period of Jesuit painting in China from 1582 to 1644. This time span corresponds to the last years of the Ming Dynasty. Jesuit painting continued a Christian legacy dating from the 7th-8th centuries. However, Jesuit painting differed from previous Christian painting in China because of its strategic role in missionary activity. The Jesuits envisaged a strategy to approach both the emperor and potential patrons, taking advantage of the curiosity and openness a Chinese audience might feel for Christian painting. The strong Chinese influence shown by Jesuit painting must be further linked to the missionary strategy that accepted and worked with elements of the culture and the spirituality of the local audience. Its prototypes were mainly European. These paintings would be commissioned to Chinese and other Asian artists, such as Japanese painters. The circulation of Mexican paintings in China from 1578 may explain some similarities between the paintings of these two distant geographic areas. Eventually, Chinese painting would be influenced by European art.



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This paper focuses on the study of the first period of Jesuit painting in China, which was created during the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The Jesuits first arrived in Macau in the 1560s, and in Canton (Guangzhou) in 1583. Matteo Ricci S.J. (1552-1610) and Diego de Pantoja S.J. (1571-1618) initiated the Jesuit mission at the Imperial Court of Peking in 1601 (Rute, 2016).

The Italian Jesuit Giovanni Cola (1560-1626) produced an oil painting of the *Salvator Mundi* (Jesus Christ as “Saviour of the World”) in Macau between August 1582 and July 1583 (García-Gutiérrez, 2011, p. 103). This painting, unfortunately no longer extant, was probably one of the oldest developed during the Jesuit China mission. It introduced the Chinese to a popular depiction of Christ, according to which Jesus blesses with His right hand while holding the earth globe in His left (Curvelo, 2018, p. 47).



Figure 1. Murals from the Nestorian Temple at Qocho. (2019).

Retrieved March 26, 2020, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murals\\_from\\_the\\_Nestorian\\_Temple\\_at\\_Qocho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murals_from_the_Nestorian_Temple_at_Qocho)



Figure 2. Murals from the Nestorian temple at Qocho. (2019).

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In China, the Jesuits encountered a philosophical, and spiritual framework marked by Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Spontaneous processes of devotional and artistic hybridisation, and syncretism between local and Christian arts and rituals, arose immediately in the aftermath of the Jesuit arrival in China.

Jesuit painting continued an ancestral tradition dating back to the Nestorian Christian communities, who settled along the Silk Road between the 7th and the 8th centuries. Yan cites mural fragments containing two scenes of the Passion: the Palm Sunday Entry into Jerusalem

(now lost) and the repentance of women, found in Qocho, a commercial center along the Silk Road in present-day Xinjiang Province (Yan, 2009). These fragments, dating between the 7th and the 9th centuries, are among the oldest evidence connected with the Nestorian communities.

A renewed Christian presence in China, occurring during the Yüan (Mongol) Dynasty (1271-1368), provided a new stimulus to painting. A letter written in 1306 by the Italian Franciscan, Giovanni de Montecorvino, says that he had commissioned the painting of six pictures representing the Old and New Testaments for the instruction of the ignorant, and with inscriptions in Latin, Tarsic and Persian characters so that everybody would be able to read them in one tongue or another (Montecorvino, 1306, p. 352).

TO RAISE THE INTEREST OF THE EMPEROR AND  
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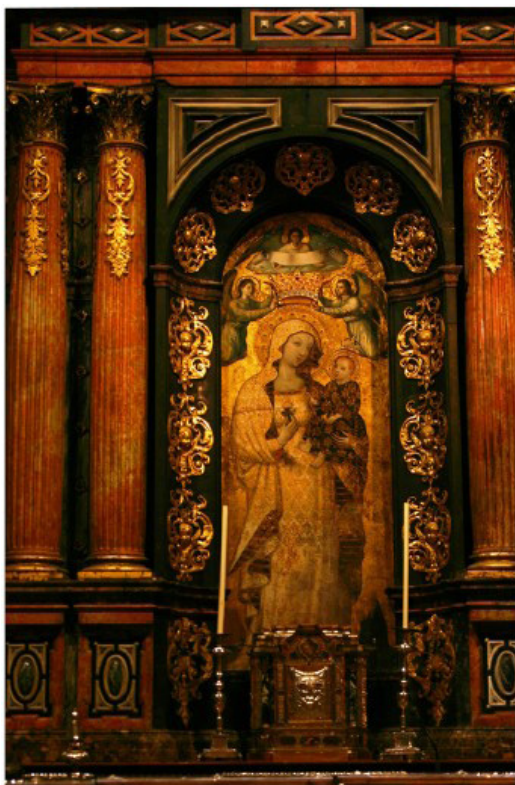


Figure 3. Chapel of la Virgen Antigua - Cathedral of Seville.JPG. (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2020, from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25342691>

The Jesuits envisaged painting as an important tool for evangelization as images may appeal more easily to the mind than written words. Upon arrival in Macau in 1582, Matteo Ricci S.J. and Michele Ruggieri S.J. (1543-1607) displayed an impressive picture of the Virgin Mary holding the Infant Jesus in her hands. The next year, they took with them several paintings of Our Lady to Zhaoqing, near Canton. In 1601, they presented the Emperor Wanli (1572-1620) with gifts such as prints, a copy of a picture of Our Lady of Antigua, from Seville, Spain, and also paintings of the Assumption and of Our Lady holding the Infant Jesus (D'Elia, 1939, p. 68).

They well succeeded in raising the interest of Chinese patrons by commissioning paintings with Christian subjects. In the early 17th century the Emperor Wanli was so delighted when he saw a print of the *Salvator Mundi* that he immediately commissioned a court painter to copy it in a coloured large-scale format (Spence, 1985, p. 122).

The Christian lady Candida Xu, commonly known as Madame Xu (1607-1680), was probably the most distinguished patroness of Christian art in China during the 17th century. In addition to financing the building of more than forty churches in China, she commissioned Chinese and Indian artists to paint pictures for churches in Shanghai and Songjiang.

She also fostered the patronage of confraternities. She offered relics, images, medals and similar objects to the Confraternity of the Catechists each year. On the day of Archangel Saint Michael, September 29th, the confrères distributed such objects as prizes among the children they had previously instructed (Couplet, 1688, p. 41).

Jesuit painting fostered high quality standards as it was firstly conceived to obtain the emperor's benevolence towards the Jesuit mission. In the opinion of the Italian Jesuit Lazaro Cattaneo (1599):

The reason that the China mission didn't progress is due more to ourselves than to the Chinese.... It won't be possible to speak with words.... And this is our intention to gain access to the king – through somebody of authority; the other way is through a painter, the best possible one, and a good mathematician. Together, they will allow us to achieve this entrance because painters and mathematicians are taken in high consideration by the Chinese. Some excellent oil paintings would be also of further help, and for the king the larger the better, and some smaller paintings for the people which will favour us (Cattaneo, 1599, F. 319v).

Images signifying ideas of glory or power would convince the Chinese elites of the cosmopolitan character and magnificence of European civilization (Laven, 2012, pp. 70-71). Emanuel Diaz suggested to General Acquaviva in 1599 that the next embassy to Peking (a first embassy sent in 1597-1598 had failed) should bring pictures with such iconographies as the Adoration of the Magi, of some high-ranking personalities, such as of Pope Gregory with tiara, of Saint Jerome with cap, and of the popes. He argued that he had chosen these images because Chinese *literati* were much concerned about the grave appearance of the figures represented (Diaz, 1599, F. 359).

#### SPONTANEOUS APPROPRIATION AND STRATEGIC ACCOMMODATION

In China, the Jesuits encountered a philosophical, and spiritual framework marked by Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Spontaneous processes of devotional and artistic hybridisation, and syncretism between local and Christian arts and rituals, arose immediately in the aftermath of the Jesuit arrival in China.

According to R. Po-chia Hsia, during early contacts, the Chinese behaved towards the missionaries in the same manner as they behaved towards Buddhist monks. Laymen provided oil

for lamps.... Similarly, *literati* made presents of sticks of incense, bowed before holy images and asked the missionaries to officiate at their funeral ceremonies as Buddhist and Taoist monks did (Hsia, 2010, p. 24).

China constituted a well-known field for the Jesuit accommodation strategy. In their way of proceeding, the Jesuits relied on the apprehension and inclusion of certain aspects of China's cultures and spiritualities. They traced and explored similarities between Chinese and Western sacred rituals and iconographies. In 1598, the Italian Niccolò Longobardi S.J. (1565–1654) asked General Claudio Acquaviva for some images of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He argued that all Chinese, even the pagan people, shared a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary. Longobardi found evidence for this devotion in the fact that Chinese worshipped by kowtowing while repeating aloud “*Xian Mu Mian Mian*,” which he translated as “Holy Mother and Queen of the Queens” (Longobardi, 1598, F. 177v).



Figure 4. Matteo Ricci. (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2020, from [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo\\_Ricci#/media/Ficheiro:Ricciportrait.jpg](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo_Ricci#/media/Ficheiro:Ricciportrait.jpg)

The portrait of Matteo Ricci, attributed to the Chinese painter Yu Wen-hui, baptized and given the name Manuel Pereira (1575-1633), is a notable example of Sino-European painting. It is an oil painting on canvas, a technique introduced by the Jesuits into China. Ricci is presented as a Confucian *literatus*. He wears the traditional black silk robe with wide sleeves hiding his hands, an irregularly pentagonal headgear and has a beard. This portrait was painted from memory, shortly after Ricci's death in 1610, following the Chinese custom of using portraits in the cult of ancestors. As is typical in these Chinese portraits, it lacks facial expression (Guillen-Nuñez, 2014, pp. 444-445). Portraits of the deceased were displayed on family altars. The Jesuits responded to the eagerness of Chinese for portraits, while transforming the significance of such images (Fontana, 2011, p. 173).

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Accommodation to the local context was often required, in order not to hurt the sensitivity of the Chinese people. Thus, images of the Crucifixion as well as scenes of the Passion of Christ were carefully avoided within the Court's circles (Bailey, 1999, p. 118). When a eunuch at the Imperial Court saw the foreign missionaries with crucifixes, he must have thought: "They are very bad people. They had a mistreated person nailed to a cross, and full of blood, such as that, and this was nothing more than some sorcery to kill the emperor" (Pantoja, 1605, p. 415).

#### ART TRANSFORMED

Jesuit painting in China between the late 16th and the first half of the 17th century was part of the Jesuit global mission operating simultaneously on four continents. According to Gauvin Alexander Bailey, the leading scholar on Jesuit missionary art, most oil paintings imported from Europe into China at the beginning of the 17th century were done by Italian painters. Flemish illustrated books and maps and loose engravings arguably were more influential than paintings. Their size and their relatively low price facilitated their circulation within and beyond the Jesuit missions (Bailey, 1999, pp. 91-92).



*Figure 5.* Archangel Saint Michael, oil on canvas, after 1614 (n.d.). Retrieved March 26, 2020, from [http:// www.yunphoto.net/en/jouken.html](http://www.yunphoto.net/en/jouken.html)

A large painting at the Seminary of Saint Joseph, Macau, dated after 1614, represents the Archangel Michael defeating the dragon. The helmet is decorated with motifs inspired by the Chinese *lingzhi* fungus, a Chinese medical mushroom, while the dragon holds a Samurai's characteristically curved sword. This blend suggests the work of one of the Japanese painters who had found refuge in Macau in 1614, due to the persecution campaign against Christians in Japan (Bailey, 1999, p. 77).

The similarities of this painting with Cuzco paintings can be explained by the availability of Mexican paintings in China since 1578, and the circulation of European prototypes within Jesuit missions throughout the four continents (Bailey, 1999, p. 93 and Curvelo, 2018, p. 63).



Figure 6. Zeng Jing, Portrait of Wang Shimin at the age of 20 (1616).

Retrieved March 26, 2020, from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zeng\\_Jing\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Wang\\_Shimin.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zeng_Jing_-_Portrait_of_Wang_Shimin.JPG)

Syncretism and hybridisation were also projected to Chinese painting. The portrait of Wang Shimin by Zeng Jing (1564-1647) illustrates a sense of realism and a three dimensionality that may echo European art. The picture *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines* by Kung Hsien (c. 1617-1689) probably borrowed from European prototypes through strong chiaroscuro effects and twitched forms of rocks and hills (Sullivan, 1989, p. 45).

To conclude, Jesuit painting developed in China during the late Ming Dynasty differed from previous Christian painting, as it was part of a consistent missionary programme. It aimed to involve Chinese elites, such as the emperor and the Confucian *literati* as patrons, and the Chinese society in ritual and veneration. The success of this strategy relied on the appropriation of aesthetic, cultural and spiritual characteristics common in the Chinese context. The Jesuit style of painting drew from the combination of a multiplicity of both imported and local sources of inspiration. Eventually, it gave a powerful stimulus to the exchange of artistic, cultural and spiritual traditions between China and the wider world.



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