

The Painting Heavenly Goddess in Macao Integrating the Images of the Chinese and Western Beliefs

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Abstract:

The painting *Heavenly Goddess* in Franciscans Church of Macao has replaced the stereotyped norm of Chinese sages and humanistic moral expression for Matsu with the traditional Chinese “symbolic” image of ancient beauty. Meanwhile, it has incorporated the Western image of Holy Son and the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus in its composition, thus fulfilling the transformation and combination of Chinese and Western core cultures with a new visual art form integrating the Chinese and Western features. The picture is a product of the multiple social civilizations in Macao, and as a “missionary picture”, it also contains obscure missionary strategies and subtle artistic conception, marking the impact on and deconstruction of the core concepts of traditional Chinese culture by western civilization. The painting is a typical and artistic record of a period of history of cultural exchanges between China and the West since modern times.

Keywords:

Macao, Matsu, Heavenly Goddess, Missionary Painting, Missionary Strategy, Cultural Exchange, Integrating the Chinese and Western Features

1. Introduction

Franciscans Church in Macao has a life-sized oil painting Heavenly Goddess named after its eight-character vertical inscription which means “Heavenly Goddess, pray for us”. The Heavenly Goddess in question is the honorific title of Matsu in China. Matsu is the image of the supreme belief in the southeast coastal areas of China including Macao, and its status is by no means lower than that of Confucius and Laozi. However, although this painting is named after the honorific title of Matsu, the image is much different from the Matsu in the Matsu Pavilion in Macao and the major temples along the coast. The figure in the painting is Matsu holding a baby, which

seems to be in line with the meaning of the Chinese folk custom of “Matsu giving a child”. However, Heavenly Goddess is depicted as a beautiful fairy in the traditional Chinese picture of ancient beauty, yet holding a holy staff decorated with a cross; the child with open arms is placed above Heavenly Goddess's left arm, showing the Western god's attitude of welcoming and embracing common people; the combination of their postures is more in line with the image logic of the Christian “Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus”. Throughout the history of cultural exchange and art in ancient and modern times, except in the painting in question, the image of the Western Virgin Mary has never been directly incorporated into any Chinese holy image. This painting is unique and therefore of great value for the study of the historical and cultural exchanges between China and the West.

2. Initial Incorporation of a Religious Image: Matsu's Symbolization of National Art

According to the norm of Confucian “sage” in China, Matsu statue is usually presented as the image of an aristocratic lady, the wife of a court official of high rank, and an empress or imperial concubine. At present, the image of Matsu is mostly inherited from the Qing Dynasty. The statue of Matsu in the Matsu Pavilion in Macao and the statue of white marble Matsu at the top of Alto de Coloane both have their quality marked by the “tiara” on their heads, with brilliant and complicated bead curtains, jade and emeralds on them. Most of the statues are in a dignified sitting posture, but there are also a few standing postures, with both hands holding a Ruyi, an S-shaped traditional Chinese ornamental object made of jade as a symbol of good luck. Their postures are similar to those of ancient officials who held a Hu, a tablet held before the breast by officials in front of the emperor in the imperial court. There are also statues who wear official hats and robes directly, with the dignity and extraordinary bearing of men. Beside them immortals are usually arranged for support, appearing to be majestic, magnificent and extremely imposing. By contrast, it is interesting to note that the “Heavenly Goddess” in Heavenly Goddess of Franciscans Church in Macao is much different from the usual Matsu image. Besides a red skirt, no more of the traditional Matsu appearance and dress features was seen on her body. Instead, it has observed the appearance of ancient beauties in traditional Chinese paintings: slim and graceful figure, moon-like face, arch eyebrows and cherry lips, headwear made of flowers or in a raised shape, and with her skirt hanging and swaying, her ribbons winding and flowing, her sleeves dancing with the wind, she seems to be about to mount the clouds and ride the mist amid the floating colorful clouds. Without the baby in her arms and the holy staff, we could simply regard it as an ordinary image of noble beauty or goddess.

In traditional Chinese painting, as far as female images are concerned, there are rich themes covering a wide range: from the earliest silk paintings for tombs in the Warring States period (475 to 221 B.C.) to the virgins and heroines of the Qin and Han dynasties, fairy maids and servants of the Wei and Jin dynasties, imperial beauties of the Sui and Tang dynasties, folk ladies of the Song and Yuan dynasties, and elegant beauties in brothels of the Ming and Qing dynasties...presenting a time-honored history and changing logic. In brief, its development process mainly evolved from the semantic symbol of etiquette education to the aesthetic symbol of pure visual enjoyment. Ancient painters never regarded women as figures in paintings with independent personalities. They only expressed conceptual and historical features attached to the images, and sometimes even the image and layout have remained the

same for thousands of years in their portrayal of women. In the middle and late Ming dynasty, with the development of commodity economy and the prosperity of citizen culture in Jiangnan areas (overall regions south of the Yangtze River), the secular image of beautiful women began being welcomed by the general public and quickly became a symbol of aesthetic consumption. The idealized and stereotyped tendency of “painting of beauties” became more obvious. To sum up, the depiction of women in ancient Chinese paintings had relatively stable visual logic and aesthetic habits. The Chinese paintings of ancient beauty “are rather nearly “symbols” than “reappearance” in a strict sense...becoming a visual index for people to determine general social relations and universal orientation.” [1]

In this sense, for the purpose of crystallizing some Western religious intention in the belief of Heavenly Goddess, i.e., Matsu, it is necessary to blur the image of Matsu first, gradually change the unique cultural connotation of this image and “symbolize” the image, before this already completely changed visual “symbol” of traditional Chinese women can be used to incorporate Western religious elements. This is the first step to conceive and implement the artistic missionary function of Heavenly Goddess, and also the first theme of this painting.

3. Fuzzy Fusion of the Image of “Matsu Giving a Child” and the Image of “Virgin Mary Holding Baby Jesus”

The composition form of juxtaposing children and women in Chinese art has existed for a long time, but it was mainly used as a visual medium for moral teaching in the early stage. For example, in *Sister Liang Jie* and *Sister Lu Yi* among the Han Dynasty stone reliefs in Wuliang Temple of Shandong Province, the images of women and children were juxtaposed in the narrative. However, its purpose was not to depict for the sake of appreciation, but to supplement and emphasize the metaphorical narrative. Later, in *Picture of Lady Officials* by Gu Kaizhi, a top painter of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 to 420 A. D.), scenes of women and babies could also be seen, but they were still propagating specimens of preaching or teaching family concepts.

The paintings of babies and women turned into independent aesthetic objects matured in the period of full literary grandeur in the Tang dynasty, corresponding to most of the 8th century. The representative painter was Zhang Xuan, a famous court painter in the Kaiyuan period. The ancient books described that he was good at painting ancient beauties in the imperial palace, “and he could also paint babies, which was especially difficult”. [2] The techniques, colors, compositions and shapes of his works are all more exquisite, and have been included into the evaluation system of painting theory.

The royal court of the Zhao family’s Song Dynasty advocated civil administration, creating an unprecedented prosperity of literature and art, and also promoting its development to secularization and popularization. A new painting theme-“Painting of Playing Babies”, became widely popular because it conformed to the life aspiration of the general public for growing family size and harmonious domestic atmosphere.

The composition of “holding a baby” originated from the idea of “children-sending Guanyin” before it entered religious belief. *Sutra on the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma · The Universal Door of Gwan Shr Yin Bodhisattva* of the Wei and Jin Dynasties established Guanyin’s function of sending children early. [3] Up till the Tang Dynasty, anecdotes and legends about women getting children by praying to Guanyin emerged one after another. For example, in the early Tang Dynasty, the

famous monk Wan Hui was born by his mother after she prayed to Guanyin. [4] From the Song and Yuan dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the rapid development of citizen culture, the popular tendency of Guanyin sending children was more and more obvious, with a large number of compositions of “holding a baby” centering on the theme of “Guanyin sending children” mushrooming in New Year pictures, small paper paintings and block prints, etc. Children-sending Guanyin became the object of praying and worshipping from the nobility down to the common people.

In the southeast coastal areas of China, Matsu belief has also been reformed by the “Guanyin sending children” and is also endowed with the magic impregnating power by the worshippers. [5] The custom of praying Matsu to send children is most popular in Tianjin City. Tianjin's folk customs of “tying dolls”, “stealing dolls” and “washing dolls” are all related to Tianjin Tian Hou Temple. Tianjin Tian Hou Temple is the largest temple of Heavenly Goddess in northern China. Although there are dedicated goddesses to send children, those who pray for children still worship Heavenly Goddess as the main goddess sending children. [6]

The life-related and realistic image of “holding a baby” and the desire to “pray for a child” symbolizing religious belief in ancient China’s “Painting of Playing Babies” are not only different from the Western “Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus” in signification, but also in figures. However, from the perspective of the most basic dynamic relationship among the characters-“holding a baby”, the Chinese and Western forms are still consistent. Therefore, there is no doubt that China's worldly will and schema of “sending children” are accepted as the foothold for Western religions to seek interculturality and the ideal carrier of religious consciousness. This can also be understood as the reason why the Christian portrait of “Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus” was once widely circulated in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In this way, the image of “Guanyin sending children” and the wish of “Matsu giving a child” in China and the doctrine of the Western “Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus” have got similar visual logic. Although the title of the painting *Heavenly Goddess* has cleverly avoided the suspicion of “holding a child” or “sending children”, it has changed the composition that reflects the traditional Chinese custom and will of praying for a child to “Heavenly Goddess holding a child”, using the Chinese belief of “Guanyin sending children” and “Matsu giving a child” to spread the Western religious discourse of “the Virgin Mary and Holy Son”. This is the central design of the artistic missionary function of *Heavenly Goddess*, which fulfills the central theme of the painting.

4. The Artistic Conception and Missionary Strategy of “China for the West”

There have been several obvious climaxes when foreign religions entered China. At the beginning of each entry, they made use of visual arts that surmounted language barriers first. Missionary images accelerated and broadened the speed and breadth of the spread of Western religions among Chinese folks. Compared with the previous times, the number of missionary images and the importance of their status since the Ming and Qing dynasties became the important characteristics of missionary work in this period. Matteo Ricci highly appreciated the missionary pictures, believing that compared with complicated and obscure doctrinal texts, the religious images of direct

appeal are obviously more acceptable to the Chinese people. [7] In 1598, Italian missionary Niccolo Longobardi in China sent a letter to the Jesuit General asking for a large increase in the supply of missionary paintings, [8] which shows their indispensable role in the missionary work.

However, for a long time, the attention of the Chinese government and the people to these missionary images has been limited to the different realistic skills of Western paintings and Chinese literati's freehand brushworks, and they have not shown much enthusiasm for religious principles. In *Superfluous Words in the Parlour* by Gu Qiyuan (1565 to 1628 A. D.) of the Ming Dynasty, there is a classic question-and-answer dialogue with Matteo Ricci about the Western portrait of the Virgin Mary. Although Matteo Ricci explained it himself, the author was still only concerned with the painting skills. With a full length of nearly 400 words, the text hardly touched upon the meaning of the painting. [9] In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, *A History of Silent Art* by Jiang Shaoshu (? to around 1680) also mentioned that the vividness of the image of God had not been surpassed by Chinese artists, but as to religious content, it had no intention of exploration either. [10] As for God and his mother, they were only described by Gu Qiyuan as "a child held by a married woman", and by Jiang Shaoshu as "a woman holding a baby". Gu and Jiang were both mid-level officials in the imperial court, and both were artists. Even they gave such comments, not to mention ordinary people.

However, from another perspective, it was also because of the Chinese people's insensitivity to and ignorance of foreign religious thoughts that it was even more necessary to combine images designed by missionaries with religious principles.

How could this combination be effective? Hong Zaixin mentioned the issue of people's "spiritual belonging" in the discussion of Chinese and Western art exchanges, [11] that is, the "spiritual belonging" of Chinese audiences should be taken into account first, which is inseparable from the traditional Chinese cultural soil. Confronting a brand-new cultural form, only when people find its common factors with their own cultural system can they fill the gap of acceptance and then realize cultural exchange. Therefore, how to set up an ambiguous space between the two incompatible image styles is a problem to be solved by Western painters and missionaries.

Heavenly Goddess has obviously followed the method of the preceding Western painters and missionaries, grafting the Christian "Virgin Mary" onto the spiritual idol Matsu, the "spiritual belonging" of Macao people, in accordance with Macao's local culture and belief customs, hoping to gain the acceptance and approval of the folks. According to our good faith speculation, it was a missionary strategy of Western missionaries to get close to Chinese culture so as to avoid cultural conflicts. This is the universal and representative Christian art missionary conception expressed by *Heavenly Goddess*.

5. Misunderstandings in Cultural Indirect Translation of Heavenly Goddess

At this point in the discussion of the topic, the author of this paper found that there was something disturbing about this historical summary. That is the motif of Matsu, the "Heavenly Goddess" borrowed for the painting.

“Cultural contacts often rely on indirect translation, which does not only refer to the indirect translation of language, but also the indirect translation of the original history and knowledge to understand and imagine almost all things of foreign culture.” [12] In other words, it can be said that one effective way and approach of cultural indirect translation is to extract some cultural genes from the original historical memory to understand or even replace similar fragments of the other party. Indirect translation makes mistranslation inevitable. Mistranslation often results from different cultural backgrounds, but it is sometimes intentional. For example, French priest Pere Francois Xavier D'entrecolles (with his Chinese name Yin Hongxu) believed that Chinese Guanyin is a counterpart of Venus and Diana in Greek mythology, [13] and when Portuguese Dominican priest Gaspar da Cruz traveled to South China in 1556, he regarded children-sending Guanyin as Jesus Christ's mother. [14]

However, this kind of indirect translation is premised on some conditions and the misunderstandings are tolerable within limits. The translator must have full understanding of and respect for the culture of the source language before choosing an acceptable position, materials and methods for indirect translation into the target language. Matteo Ricci conducted indirect translations among several languages and then came to China, first wearing a monk's coat and being addressed as a “monk”, then turning to the Confucian scholar's costumes and learning the "six classics", [15] trying to understand and respect Chinese culture, and then he got close to the Chinese emperor and scholar-officials, built churches in Beijing and preached to the congregation. The establishment of “Matteo Ricci model” actually went through what some modern Western scholars call “cultural transcendence”. In cultural exchange, one must first “transcend” one's own deep-rooted “invisible culture” and understand and enter the others world before one can have real communication. [16] In terms of Chinese thought, “emptiness and self-control” are the first steps to "harmony between heaven and human”.

What sustains the “Chinese belief system” is the core values of the Chinese nation. The belief in Matsu in China originated from the folks of the coastal areas in the Northern Song Dynasty (960 to 1127 A. D.). In the fifth year of the Xuanhe period under Emperor Huizong's reign (1123 A. D.), Matsu Temple was granted the horizontal board inscribed “Shun Ji” for the first time. From the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the main titles conferred imperially included “Lady”, “Princess”, “Heavenly Princess”, “Saint Princess” and “Heavenly Goddess”, etc. [17] Since the Song Dynasty, the folks have honored it as “Saint Mother”. [18] In Chinese history, only a few historical figures, such as Confucius, Mencius, Guan Yu and Yue Fei, were conferred “Saint” titles by the imperial government. Among the folks, the historical figures revered as “Saint Mother” include only Matsu and Xian Ying, Ms Xian renowned as “the first heroine”, [19] which shows the loftiness of the title. “Goddess” is the highest status of Chinese women. “Saint” is the highest grade of moral evaluation in China. The concepts of “Matsu”, “Goddess” and “Saint” belong to the highest realm of Chinese beliefs and allow no offence and falsification. Some Chinese scholars studying Matsu culture have questioned and discussed the two loftiest titles of “Saint Princess” and “Heavenly Goddess” granted to Matsu, [20] precisely because of the special status and significance of these two words in Chinese culture. Even if they were conferred by the emperor, the utmost caution should be emphasized.

As far as the creation method is concerned, in Heavenly Goddess Matsu did not present a universally recognized visual form. Instead, Matsu was transformed with the traditional symbol of ordinary ancient beauties, and then shaped in the posture of the Western Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus and of saints. After blurring and interrupting the cognition and interpretation of the image of Matsu in China, Heavenly Goddess immediately incorporated Western values and religious thoughts. It is like cutting off the form and content relationship between the “signifier” and “signified” in linguistics before new discourse meanings are incorporated. Of all the Buddhist and Christian missionary paintings and religious paintings brought to China, Heavenly Goddess might be the only one that dares to transform the image of the loftiest belief in China.

In the process of writing this paper, the author interviewed some people and church administrators who entered and left the Franciscans Church in Macao. They had the same views on the painting Heavenly Goddess and said: “It is a missionary painting, not a picture of Matsu.” It shows that as a bridgehead for the spread of Western learning to the East and a place where Chinese and Western cultures converge, Macao still provides favorable social soil and political atmosphere for the interaction and symbiosis of heterogeneous cultures. Even though the painting Heavenly Goddess seems to have achieved the transformation and integration of the supreme religious doctrines of the West and the core concepts of Macao’s culture, which can be said to be a successful case of foreign religious arts being localized by the Chinese society, Macao people hold conscious and firm belief in national cultural identity out of reverence for traditional definitions and sage beliefs. The “holy meaning” of Heavenly Goddess is limited to the sphere of churches and has not been universally recognized by Macao people.

6. Conclusion

The philosopher Bourdieu put forward the artistic field theory for modern and contemporary art. He believed that when the aesthetic standard is absent, the social context against which art comes into being and exists should become the key factor for art historians to consider works of art, that is, to conduct art research and think about the issue of “artistic belief” from the perspectives of history, sociology and anthropology, and to understand and fill the “spaces of possibility” of art itself with different factors. [21] Foucault also proposed thinking about power discourse behind cultural phenomena. [22] This method is equally important for “missionary art”. Scholars used to define “missionary image” as a simple “religious image”, which was only confined to the explanation and induction of certain religious beliefs at a certain time or place. Actually, that is not the case. Missionary image involves the communication and interaction between heterogeneous cultures and the strategies and means adopted to realize the communication and interaction, the mighty momentum and incorporation of Western culture, the rupture of Chinese culture and native self-discipline, and the tension of the game between Chinese culture and Western culture.

Heavenly Goddess regards the reformation of Chinese sage belief as the motif of missionary painting. It serves as a footnote to remind us that we should consider cultural exchange in a broader sense. Taking history as a mirror and looking at the present, we see that various images of “integration of China and the West” are numerous in the modern society driven by information technology and the Internet. They once became the usual visual symbols taken for granted, and they are undoubtedly an embodiment of multi-culture phenomenon. Although for other cultures the mighty Chinese culture is as tolerant as a sea for rivers, we should pay

more attention to the fact that cultural exchange starts from mutual respect and based on the inviolability of the core concepts of both or all parties. Therefore, the power discourse and communication strategy behind the art of “integration of China and the West” accomplished in the exchange of heterogeneous civilizations deserve our cautious treatment and careful rethinking. The value of Heavenly Goddess lies in that it has summarized the ideological tendency and thinking mode of Western cultural exporters from modern times to the present. At the same time, it has inadvertently become an exquisitely designed artistic record of a period of Chinese and Western cultural exchange history.(Figure 1)



Figure 1. The painting Heavenly Goddess in Franciscans Church of Macao.

Heavenly Goddess, pray for us

Conflicts of Interest

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