

Our Lady of China: Christian Appropriation in Chinese Culture

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Throughout history, Christian missionaries have struggled arduously to promote Christianity in China, but the development of Christianity in general has not been successful as it has been in other locales, such as Mesoamerica. Why is it that Christianity cannot be as popular as Buddhism, which is also a “foreign” religion from India, even though it has many more missionaries engaged in the program? In the essay, I will use the icon of “Our Lady of China,” the Chinese Christian representation of the Virgin Mary around 1900, as an example to demonstrate how Chinese Christians appropriated Chinese traditions into local Christianity.

While on missions in China, Christian missionaries often get involved in political power struggles and thus are forced to stop their missions. In the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), there were already missionaries acting in China before Marco Polo’s arrival, and the ruling class welcomed them. However, once the dynasty was replaced by Ming dynasty (1368-1644), all the foreign religions, including Christianity, were forbidden, in order to erase the influence of last regime. Although Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian Jesuit priest worked for the royal family for decades, regained the trust of Emperor Shenzong in 1601, but after fifteen years all the Christian missionaries were expelled again due to a political conspiracy.<sup>1</sup> The same situation happened repeatedly in early Qing dynasty (1644-1912), which was the last dynasty in China.<sup>2</sup>

After China was defeated in the Opium War in 1840, the Qing dynasty was forced to allow the international trade between China and European great powers. The Qing government had forbidden all missionary activities in 1746, but the change in political climate allowed Christian missionaries to preach in China again. However, missionaries soon found it was a Herculean task to convert the Chinese to Christianity. Paul A. Cohen points out that what missionaries tackle is an anti-Christian tradition in China during the period:

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<sup>1</sup> 王治心,[Chin-Hsin Wang] 中國基督教史綱.[History of Christianity in China] (基督教文藝: 1979), 104.

<sup>2</sup> 林治平,[Chin-Ping Lin] 基督教與中國. [Christianity and Chinese] (宇宙光:1976), 89.

.....The extent of this anti-Christian activity is suggested by the situation in the 1860's. At one time or another during this decade vast sections of China appear to have been literally swamped with anti-Christian propaganda. Moreover, although the exact number of cases of open or veiled opposition to the missionary and covert will never be known, one Chinese bibliography lists over fifty of these important enough to require top-level diplomatic activity, and the record indicates that the number of less important cases, which were settled locally during the 1860's, may well have run into the thousands. Naturally, we have no way of proving that the great majority of these cases were directly or indirectly inspired by the educated classes. But the evidence available and the virtually unanimous opinion of contemporary foreigners both tend to support such an assumption.<sup>3</sup>

One difficulty that Christian missionaries faced was to promote monotheism in a polytheistic society. Moreover, the concept of “god” is quite different between Christianity and Chinese religions. In Christianity, God declares himself to Moses: “I AM THAT I AM.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus also informs the public that he is the son of God. The main idea of Christianity is “incarnation,”<sup>5</sup> which treats Jesus as God come to the earth to lead and save the Christians. On the other hand, the gods in Chinese traditional religions are all “deified” to become gods: prince Siddhartha became Gautama Buddha in Buddhism, the ancestor of the Song dynasty became the Jade Emperor of heaven in Taoism, and there are hundreds of “gods” who came from history, including Confucius. Due to this background, the Christian missionaries found it very challenging to convert Chinese people to monotheism, since the public just treated the Christian God as one of many foreign gods, and put it into the Chinese pantheon. For missionaries, it was difficult to explain their God to Chinese people:

Chinese did not, in general, understand that the Christian mysteries are beyond human reason and that it is vain to attempt to refute them. When Father Aleni declared that: “Only the master of Heaven was there before the earliest Antiquity and never grows old,” Xu Dashou asked him: “who give birth to the Master of Heaven, then?” “His mother,” he replied. “He has a mother, yet he is eternal?” Aleni said: “That is the Master of Heaven who came down to be born on earth, for there is also a Master of Heaven who was born of himself who is really eternal.”

<sup>3</sup> Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Christian Missions in China; Evangelists of What?* (Boston: Heath, 1965), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3:14, The Bible, King James Version.

<sup>5</sup> 邵玉銘,[Yu-Ming Shao] 二十世紀中國基督教問題. [Christianity in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century] (正中:1983), 328.

..... Xu Dashou writes: So I went on to ask him whether the master of Heaven was a principle of order or a man. He made no reply. ....<sup>6</sup>

Besides Chinese polytheism, the more profound obstacle that Christian missionaries had to address was Confucianism, the dominant philosophy in Chinese culture. The founder Confucius was an agnostic.<sup>7</sup> According to *Lunyu*, the analects of Confucius, when a pupil asks, “How does one serve ghosts?” Confucius’s answer is, “You cannot even serve humans well, how can you serve ghosts?”<sup>8</sup> In another chapter, another pupil records that Confucius, “never talks about gods and ghosts such spiritual beings.”<sup>9</sup> Confucius never denies that supernatural phenomenon exist, but those are not what he focuses on. His focus is on fulfilling one’s role as human, and one of most profound concept is filial piety (孝 “xiao” in Chinese), which fundamentally undermined the doctrines of Christianity by placing importance on the ancestors above importance on God.

Since the Han dynasty (202 B.C- 220 A.D.), “xiao” has been considered the most important personal characteristic due to the promotion of Confucianism by the ruling class. An ordinary person could become a civil servant if his performance of “xiao” was acknowledged by the official organization. Under the motto of, “Xiao is the first concern of a hundred morals,” Confucian logic argues that if one is not “xiao,” the one must fail to be loyal, or to behave well. For those who followed Confucianism, foreign missionaries were, “without the five relationships (ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend), which was a serious charge leveled by Chinese critics against Christian missionaries.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 224.

<sup>7</sup> 邵玉銘,[Yu-Ming Shao] 316.

<sup>8</sup> 論語[Lunyu] 先進第十一, translated by the author.

<sup>9</sup> 論語[Lunyu] 述而第七, translated by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Barnett, and John Fairbank, *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 112.

The most important performance of being “xiao” is to worship the ancestors in the family tree. As “xiao” means filial piety, taking care of one’s parents and grandparents and so on is the minimum requirement, and worshipping is the way to take care of dead ancestors. For Christianity, the practice of worshipping ancestors conflicts with the monotheistic nature of the religion, and caused the so-called “Chinese Rites Controversy” from 1610 to 1939.<sup>11</sup> The controversy happened when missionaries reported to the Vatican that Chinese Christians were still worshipping “pagan” gods including the dead ancestors and other gods in Chinese polytheism. This argument is basically caused by cultural discrepancy:

The Fundamental problem at issue was the symbolic meaning of the objects and gestures involved in the rites. This was the crux of the controversy. When Confucius was called the holy one, did this signify a divine attribute? What was the meaning of the bowing and the bending of the knees before an image or picture of Confucius or before the corpse of the deceased? What was the significance of the spiritual tablets? Were they taken as the habitat of the souls of the dead? Why were prayers and petitions directed to them? Why were food and flowers placed in front of them? What was the purpose of the candles and incense used at funerals.<sup>12</sup>

The controversy did not end until Pope Pius XII announced *Plane compertum est* in 1939 to admit worshipping the ancestors and Confucianism is not a form of idolatry, and therefore is not irreconcilable with Christianity. In other words, the ritual disagreement was never settled during the entire Qing dynasty.

With the cultural invasion of China by industrialized countries, Chinese nationalism rose, as did the anti-Western cultural movement. This ultimately triggered the Boxer movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Christianity, being the representative of Western culture, inevitably became a major target attacked by the anti-Christian Boxers during this period. One reason is that when western countries made unequal treaties with Qing government, they

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<sup>11</sup> George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Minamiki, 206.

acquired extraterritoriality, which exempted the Christian churches from control of the Chinese officials. For Christianity, Western imperialism is a double-edged sword. It provides the religion a strong means but also invokes hatred from Chinese people:

The political encroachments of foreign nations, under the guise of leases of territory, is one of the principal causes of the trouble. These events exasperated China almost to the point of desperation; for she thought, and not without reason, that these inroads upon the part of the great powers were preliminary to the conquest of the empire. . . . . Foreign syndicates have done no little in fomenting the trouble. Backed by their respective governments they have pressed, if not forced, from the Chinese concessions for the working of mines and the building of railways. Rightly or wrongly, the people believe that these have been extorted from them. The introduction of railways and labor-saving machinery has been opposed here on the same ground as in other countries, that they throw many laborers out of employment. The great bulk of the Boxers in Chihli were recruited from the carters and the boatmen, the two classes which have suffered most from the building of the railways.<sup>13</sup>

Because of this, Boxers were against any foreign objects, and foreigners, including people who worked in foreign buildings or converted into Christians. The missionaries' lives were under threat during the Boxer Movement. A telegraph sent by a group of American missionaries in Beijing to the President McKinley reflects their situation in 1900:

Boxers destroy chapels, massacre hundreds Christians, threaten exterminate all foreigners ... Chinese troops useless. Attack Beijing, Tientsin (the international port near Beijing) daily threatened. Railways destroyed, telegraphs cut. Chinese government paralyzed. Imperial edicts double-faced; favor Boxers. Universal peril. Unless situation promptly relieved, 30 Americans convened regard outlook practically hopeless.<sup>14</sup>

Although the situation of Christianity in China was not promising, paradoxically, the Boxer movement accelerated the development of Christianity and the icon "Our Lady of China," which has become the symbol of Chinese Christian in modern China. During the Boxer movement in June of 1900, around nine thousand Chinese Christians crowded into Donglu, a small town with

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<sup>13</sup> World Affairs Institute, "Three Prime Causes of the Boxer Uprising," *The Advocate of Peace* 63:5 (1901): 103.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Barr, *To China with Love; the Lives and Times of Protestant Missionaries in China, 1860-1900*. (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 170.

a Christian church near Beijing, to seek shelter from the Boxers. Under the lead of Father Wang, these Chinese Christians built entrenchment wooden fences around the church. Before long, forty thousand Boxers surrounded Donglu and tried to destroy the church. The Christians defeated their attack four times with a limited number of guns and cannons. The battles continued until 15<sup>th</sup> August, when International Legations occupied Beijing, the capital city. Donglu church became one of the only two intact churches in Hebei province survived from the Boxer Movement.<sup>15</sup> Because of this, the number of converted Chinese Christian started to increase in the area.

The increasing number of Christian in Donglu was mainly due to the fall of the Boxers. For missionaries, they had won not only the physical war, but also the war of belief. The Christians successfully defense of Donglu church was seen as proof that the Christian God is mightier than Chinese gods. The residents declared that the reason Donglu church survived the attack of the Boxers is that “the woman with white cloth,” which is what Christians called the Virgin Mary, protected the Christians. According to a record in the Vatican, the first icon that Donglu church used during the Boxer movement is traditional Christian structure: Virgin Mary and Jesus are on the center surrounded by angels. (Fig. 1) A missionary on the left is presenting the church to God. The Chinese elder on the right is worshipping, as are the other Chinese children (though one in the middle is playing, to show the innocence). The Chinese Christians here are represented in Qing dress and hairstyle, but the other elements of the icon are still foreign to the Chinese public at that time.

After surviving the Boxer movement, Donglu church decided renovate the facilities and the icon of Virgin Mary. Ironically, the new icon of Virgin Mary in Donglu was based a picture of

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<sup>15</sup> 佐原篤介,[Sahara Atsushikai] 拳亂紀聞. [Record of The Boxer Movement](神州國光社, 1951), 112.

Tzu-Hsi, the queen dowager who decided to legalize the Boxer movement and expel the westerners. In other words, the model of Our Lady of China in Donglu is the most influential enemy of Chinese Christians, though the Christians in Donglu might not have thought so. In 1904, led by the French Father P. Flament, the church hired a French painter in Shanghai to repaint the Virgin Mary in Donglu. The desire was based on three principles: First, the Virgin Mary's dressing style is that of a Chinese empress. Since the Chinese emperor had long been considered as the "son of the heaven," the empress was treated as the counterpart of Mary in Chinese culture. Second, the Virgin Mary must have a kind face and wear a crown, to show the nobility and elegance. Third, the Christ Child also needs to accompany his mother, indicating the importance of Mary in Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

Following these three principles, P. Flament and the painter started to look for the material. By that time, photography was already popular among Chinese aristocrats, so it was not hard to get the empress's picture, which was also collected by westerners because of its oriental exoticism. (Fig. 2) Therefore, the Virgin Mary's dress is identical with the empress's: a Chinese female imperial cloth studded with flora motif, and the black "dots" on the edge are actually the Chinese character of "longevity." To fit the requirements of Christianity, they replaced the fan in the empress's right hand with a scepter, and let her left hand hold the Christ Child. (Fig. 3)

However, even though the Chinese dressing style was applied, when it came to Mary's head, the two French painters turned to the Christian tradition to give Mary a Caucasian face with a high nose, a gorgeous crown with gems, and a white veil as the symbol of virginity. The child Jesus is represented in a mixed style: he stands next to the Virgin Mary on the chair, following the construction of traditional icon paintings. Besides the crown and red cape he wears, there are

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<sup>16</sup> 宋稚青,[Chin-Ching Sung] The Origin of Our Lady of China. (歷史研究,2001)



also Christian symbols on his robe: a dove on the chest signals the Holy Spirit, and the symbols of “crucifix” and Alpha and Omega, signifying that “Jesus is the beginning and the end of the world,” appear in the circles on his robes.

The background represents a mixture of eastern and western cultural elements. The screen, windows and landscape on the back comes from the West tradition. However, the motif on the screen, as the motif on the empress cloth, is the “longevity” Chinese character. The landscape, too, contains Chinese towers and houses. On the top of the arch, whose height is two meters, “Praise to Virgin Mary, the heaven queen of Donglu,” is written in Chinese from left to right. The vases on both sides indicate the traditional Chinese setting of the niche for the ancestors. Moreover, the dragon on the carpet is the most famous symbol of Chinese emperors.

I would like to argue the style represented is syncretism, which, according to the definition of Oxford English Dictionary, is an “attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, esp. in philosophy or religion.”<sup>17</sup> The icon of “Our Lady of China” combines many traditional Chinese elements together, although their main function is to persuade Chinese people into Christianity. In the Chinese polytheistic tradition, syncretism is often used to negotiate with different religions:

Most Chinese would have liked to combine the Christian religion with the Chinese cults and regretted the fact that the missionaries forbade them to do so. A Buddhist-Christian syncretism would have found favor with many Chinese and there was at least one example of it taking place: the adventurer, pirate and trader, Zheng Zhilong, baptized as a child in Macao, had devised in his stronghold of Anping in Fujian province a private chapel in which Christian and Buddhist images were placed side by side.<sup>18</sup>

What needs to be explained in the case of the Donglu church is the reason for juxtaposing

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<sup>17</sup> "syncretism, n.," *OED Online*. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196428?redirectedFrom=syncretism> (accessed March 26, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 77.

two institutional styles syncretically within the icon. Since the first icon is the one they used when the church was attacked by the Boxers, the icon was remembered for leading Christians to a miracle: surviving the anti-Christian Boxers. However, this icon was not treated as sacred relic. On the contrary, the church chose to replace the original one with a new icon that contains more Chinese elements. To interpret this event, one social phenomenon needs to be considered: a lot of Boxers converted or declared they were Christian after the movement failed because they believed the foreign god to be more powerful, or just simply to avoid revenge from the foreign army. The number of converted Boxers was several times larger than the original number of Chinese Christians. I would argue that this phenomenon may be the main reason to make a new icon of the Virgin Mary. After all, Chinese society and its traditions still existed after the Boxer Movement, and what they stood for, failed. In order to alleviate the anti-Christian sentiment, setting a new model in Chinese style was essential. It also renewed the relationship between Christian and Boxers groups since the original one was the main target that Boxers wanted to destroy.

On the other hand, missionaries did not forget their mission was to promote Christianity. From the three principles of Our Lady of China, it can be seen that even they could yield to Chinese dressing, but they insisted that the most important part, the face, must be in Western style. Otherwise, there would be no distinction from the Chinese gods. The syncretism of Our Lady of China reflects social demands and requests from different groups; however, the social demand is not always the same: it changes with the times. Twenty years after the setting of the original Our Lady of China, the icon had already become the symbol of Chinese Christianity. Intriguingly, from the postcard of the icon issued after 1924 (Fig. 4), almost all Chinese elements were removed: the pattern on the background and carpet changed into flowers, the landscape no

longer has the Chinese tower, and the chair has been replaced with one in Western style, too; all the changes signal that Chinese Christians, after the fall of Qing dynasty in 1911, considered Western Christianity to be more authentic, and transformed the icon accordingly. Our Lady of China thus becomes a mirror of the history of Christianity in China, and it is certainly possible that it will be supplanted by a new style of representation, in the future.



Fig. 1, First icon of the Donglu Church, circa 1900



Fig. 2, Photograph of the Empress



Fig. 3, Icon of the Virgin Mary, Donglu Church



Fig. 4, Postcard of the Icon, 1924