Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Art, Design and Social Sciences
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

Research on the Indigenized Visual Translation Mechanism of Chinese Christian Church Art from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to Modern and Contemporary Time

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Abstract. Existing studies often view the dissemination of Christian church art as a one-way Western export, neglecting the acceptance process in non-Western societies and the cross-cultural visual translation. This article uses a three-layer analytical framework of "visual surface - prototype comparison - cultural interpretation" to examine the localization of Christian church art in China, and takes Beijing Nan Temple (Xuanwu Gate), Guangzhou Sanxian Cathedral, and Nanjing Saint Paul's Church as case studies to explore form rewriting, material substitution, and spatial shift. At the form level, all three retain the core Western symbols but simplify the decoration, and replace the stone arches with the Chinese wooden construction logic; at the material level, they all use local materials and adjust the craftsmanship, expressing the sacredness with local materials instead of Western stones within the local craftsmanship system; at the spatial level, all three abandon the Western religious orientation and square plane, and instead embed themselves into the urban fabric of China through courtyard or street layout. The contribution of this article lies in pointing out that localization is not a single model, but presents regional differences driven by local social, economic, political and climatic forces.

Keywords: Chinese Christian church art, indigenization, visual translation, material substitution, spatial shift

1. Introduction

Globalization has expanded cultural exchanges to include religious, artistic and symbolic domains. Religious art not only expresses faith but also facilitates cross-cultural dialogue and reorganization. Between the modernization process and local preservation, China selectively accepts and creatively transforms foreign religious cultures, rooted in local aesthetics, giving birth to the localization of Christian church art.

Previous studies have mostly focused on the Western classical paradigm, viewing Christian art as a fixed system and a one-way output, while ignoring the subjectivity of non-Western recipients. Clark [1] pointed out that in Beijing's North Hall, Gothic was regarded as a symbol of "civilizing mission", local architecture was described as "a huge cage made of wood and paper", and the participation of local artisans was attributed to corruption, not a non-creative transformation. Few

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

studies have systematically examined the relationship between churches and their urban environments, thus hindering the systematic analysis of visual forms. Qu [2] conducted a case study on the urban context of a certain church, but also pointed out that domestic research generally "mainly focuses on the architectural style, form, structure and construction features of the church", rarely touching upon the urban context. The case studies of the paintings at Shangren University [3, 4] and regional church architecture [5, 6] provided valuable depth, but have not been able to establish a comprehensive framework that links these cases with broader urban or theoretical issues. Recent cross-cultural studies in the West on the artistic practices of the Jesuits [7] and the comprehensive reviews in China from Tang Dynasty Manichaeist stone carvings to modern localizations [8] laid the foundation for research, revealing the mutual penetration of Eastern and Western visual cultures. However, these studies are still relatively scattered in terms of region and time period: Xue and Gan [9] only focused on Lingnan, Li [10] and Che [11] only focused on Xi'an, Chu [3] and Shen [4] only focused on Shangren paintings. The literature lacks dynamic cross-regional comparisons and remains stuck in the classification of form features [12] - categorizing roofs, walls, interiors, materials, and motifs, failing to deeply explore how symbolic symbols are reinterpreted in local contexts [13]. Moreover, the agency of local artists is limited to passive reliance on Western recognition [14], and no localized visual logic has been refined, only providing descriptive lists [11].

This research begins from the Ming and Qing dynasties and examines the localization from three dimensions: form, materials, and space. The research asks: (1) What kind of form transformation occurred and in which visual elements was it manifested; (2) What materials were substituted (materials, techniques, colors), and what were the constraints; (3) Which unique spatial locations, layouts, and functional characteristics reflected the local social and cultural context; (4) How do these dimensions relate to form a localized visual translation mechanism. Specifically, the research examines form transformation (style, themes, subjects, composition), material substitution (local materials, techniques, costs), spatial adaptation (location, layout, function), and their interrelationships under the influence of politics, materials, and social economy.

Beyond the perspective of one-way transmission, based on literature review, this study selected three churches from the Ming-Qing to modern times. Using a three-layer framework of "visual surface - prototype comparison - cultural interpretation", it conducted an analysis of the form, materials and spatial dimensions. Through cross-regional and historical comparisons, it reveals the patterns and provides theoretical insights for cross-cultural communication and cultural integration in the context of globalization.

2. Theoretical framework

Traditional translation studies are confined to language conversion. Although Jakobson had already proposed inter-symbolic translation, they still ignored other symbol systems. The dissemination of Chinese culture relies on language translation; the absence of referents forces domestication, resulting in the dilution of meaning and the risk of misinterpretation. Wu and Li [15] proposed "visual translation" - a cross-cultural communication method that involves reorganization, encoding, and interaction of multiple symbol systems (text, graphics, images, videos). However, this concept is still limited to translation studies, multimodal discourse analysis, and the visualization of literary texts, and is rarely systematically applied to art history and architectural history. Nevertheless, the built environment itself is a composite visual text. Xi [16] extended multimodal analysis to the translation of ancient Chinese architecture, marking the emergence of research on the interaction of architectural symbols. Visual translation highlights the cross-cultural communication and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

reconfiguration of visual symbols and is applicable to religious art and architecture. Its core logic is to reduce cultural dilution through multiple symbol interactions, which is also applicable to the localization of foreign visual cultures and revealing how Christian art was re-encoded in Chinese society.

This study draws on cross-cultural visual communication theory to construct an analytical framework of form transformation, material substitution, and spatial shift, following a progressive logic from form to material to space. Form transformation: It examines which elements of Western prototypes' forms are retained, simplified, or deleted, how the structural principles (such as flying buttresses and Baroque curves) are adapted, and how decorative symbols shift from originating narrative to target aesthetics. Material substitution: It turns to local materials, local craftsmanship, and alternative craft media, shaped by resources, climate, artisanal habits, and cultural concepts. Spatial shift: The site selection shifts from a centralized dominative style to a street-integrated type, orienting towards a local orientation, and the spatial organization shifts to courtyard logic, with functions shifting from ritual purposes to community functions. These three dimensions correspond to specific observable indicators - form transformation tracks through the retention, simplification, or deletion of Western form elements and structural principles, material substitution examines through the adoption of local materials, craftsmanship, and colors, and spatial shift analyzes through site selection patterns, orientations, and functional layouts - respectively answering "how it looks", "what to build, how to build", and "where to build, how to use", thereby revealing the transformation from cultural landmarks to social nodes.

To ensure rigor, the selection of cases follows the principles of typicality, temporal representativeness, and comparability: The South Hall in Beijing was built in 1605 and was rebuilt in 1904 under the leadership of the Jesuits, representing the early stage of church construction in North China and the relatively direct transplantation of Western architectural forms; Guangzhou's Saint Heart Cathedral was built during the late Qing Dynasty (1863 - 1888), designed by the French Catholic side, representing the mature stage of large-scale Gothic church construction in South China and the early interaction between China and the West in the construction practice; Nanjing's Saint Paul's Church started construction in 1913 and was completed in 1923, led by Chinese architects, representing the enhancement of the main role of Chinese designers in church architecture and the tendency of local space reconstruction. The three cases span different regions and historical stages, outlining the evolution from missionary dominance to Sino-foreign cooperation and then to independent Chinese design. They respectively present three forms: direct transplantation from the West, early integration of Chinese and Western cultures, and local spatial reconstruction. Together, they form a comparable set for examining the diverse paths of architectural localization.

The three-layer image analysis progresses step by step from the surface to the interior. The images analyzed are taken from the photos and drawings published in academic literature. The visual surface layer describes visible features: the composition of the facade, structural components, materials, colors, spatial axes and levels - providing an empirical basis. The prototype comparison layer identifies the morphological characteristics and composition principles of Western prototypes, determines the degree of continuation, deviation or rupture, and positions the rewriting at the decorative, structural or spatial level. The cultural interpretation layer is rooted in the historical context, exploring the underlying motivations: the influence of political environment on the expression of form and spatial posture; the shaping of material realization and form possibilities by local materials and craftsmanship; the constraints on scale, decoration and function by social and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

economic conditions and the composition of believers. Thus, it reveals the structural forces behind the form changes and explains the direction and degree of localization.

Table 1. Three-layer image analysis framework: dimensions, indicators, and judgement criteria

Analytical Layer	Analytical Dimension	Key Focus	Criteria: Continuity / Deviation / Rupture
Visual Surface Layer	Form, Material, Space	Façade, roof, openings, tower; materials and colors; orientation, plan, spatial sequence	Objective description; no stylistic judgment
Prototype Comparison Layer	Morphology: Symbols & Ornamentation	Retention of identifiable Western symbols (arched windows, spires, flying buttresses, rose windows, etc.); decorative motifs and density	Continuity: Symbols intact, decorative density comparable Deviation: Key symbols retained, but decoration simplified or motifs localized Rupture: Only fragments remain; overall visual expression shifts to a local system
	Structure: Load-bearing & Realization	Whether the structural system is replaced (stone vaulting → timber truss, raised-beam, etc.); presence of "technical translation" (brick carving imitating stone, painted wood imitating marble, etc.)	Continuity: Prototype structural system fully adopted Deviation: Functional equivalence achieved through a local system, with some spatial effects preserved Rupture: Prototype structural principles abandoned; load-transfer logic fundamentally altered
	Space: Orientation & Posture	Orientation (E–W / N–S); outward plaza / inward courtyard; relationship with urban fabric; courtyard walls, gates, screen walls	Continuity: Prototype orientation and plaza-dominant posture maintained Deviation: Orientation deflected; plaza replaced by courtyard while the main body remains recognizable Rupture: Fully embedded in the streetscape; space completely introverted
Cultural Interpretation Layer	Driving Forces	Politics, craft traditions, economics, function, climate, key individuals	Provide chains of evidence for the above deviations/ruptures; clarify primary and secondary factors

3. Methodology

To ensure comprehensive literature coverage, this study established a keyword system based on the core themes: Chinese Christian church art, indigenization, visual translation, morphological rewriting, material substitution, and spatial turn. The search was conducted from April to May 2026. Keywords included both English terms and Chinese terms (e.g., jiaotang, bentuhua, shijiao fanyi, cailiao tidai, kongjian zhuanxiang) applied in CNKI. No field investigations were conducted; data were retrieved from CNKI and Google Scholar (journal articles, dissertations, monographs, reports). The initial keyword search yielded 89 records; after screening, 27 studies with sufficient data descriptions were retained for full-text review. To integrate and verify consistency across sources, the study applied: (1) source authority assessment (prioritizing peer reviewed and archival sources

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

over lower authority works); (2) framework integration (coding all descriptions into the morphological material spatial matrix to identify agreements and divergences); and (3) text image cross comparison (where historical photographs or drawings exist, comparing them against textual claims). However, this limited the grasp of building site space and material details. To enhance rigor, a strict screening process was applied after literature acquisition. First, literature had to be highly relevant to at least one dimension (morphology, materiality, spatial turn) and address the visual expression of indigenization. Second, studies merely mentioning churches without specific visual, architectural, or historical analysis were excluded; in-depth, well-argued research was prioritized. Third, authoritative sources (high-quality journals, monographs, standardized findings) were focused on. Finally, given the temporal span and case pertinence, and reviewing the modern research trajectory, classic and specialized studies on the Beijing South Church, Guangzhou Sacred Heart Cathedral, Nanjing St. Paul's Church, Sino-Western architectural and cultural exchange, and religious art indigenization were prioritized, yielding a final set of 14 studies directly aligned with the research object.

To operationalize the prototype comparison layer, the Western architectural references for each case are specified as follows: Beijing South Church corresponds to the Jesuit-style Baroque established by Il Gesù in Rome; Guangzhou Sacred Heart Cathedral takes Notre-Dame de Paris as its Gothic model and Sainte-Clotilde in Paris as its direct design source; Nanjing St. Paul's Church is aligned with the English Rural Gothic Revival church type, specifically the village parish church tradition of the 19th century.

4. Results

4.1. Search and screening results

To support the in-depth case analysis of the three typical churches, this study searched with the keywords "Xuanwumen South Church", "Holy Heart Cathedral", "St. Paul Church" and their aliases and variations. From supplementary searches building on previous literature retrieval, 89 relevant documents were obtained. The first screening removed those that only provided historical background summaries without specific descriptions of architectural form or visual symbols, retaining 27 documents. The second screening prioritized documents that substantively discussed at least one dimension—morphological rewriting, material substitution, or spatial shift—while considering source authority; 14 documents were finally included for analysis. A limitation of this literature based approach is that all retrieved sources are confined to academic databases. Potentially valuable information not indexed by these databases may have been omitted, such as historical archives, contemporary travelogues, early photographs, missionary records, or local gazetteers. This means that certain firsthand or unprocessed evidence could be missing from the analysis.

The Baroque main facade of the South Hall has four brick pilasters dividing three bays; the central bay features a slightly recessed arched door and an upper arc-shaped cornice with a cross [17]. It faces north–south, has a rectangular plan, and wooden triangular trusses covered with grey tile sheets [18]. The side façade, divided by corbel beams, has round and circular windows in its south section and an octagonal bell tower in the north section [17]. The courtyard juxtaposes a Chinese style gate, a shadow wall, a stacked stone Virgin Mary mountain, and the European style main hall, forming a courtyard layout [19].

Its morphological rewriting is notable because local construction habits replaced Western molded bases with Chinese square pedestals, a logic of functional equivalence without formal copying; capitals mix Western volutes and Chinese grass leaves, retaining the memory of a capital while

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

substituting familiar floral motifs, meaning the capital becomes a hybrid sign rather than a faithful order [17]. Arch shoulders and cornices carry Chinese scroll-patterned flowers, replacing Baroque cartouches with native auspicious symbols, implying that decoration shifted from biblical narrative to generic blessing [17]. The lower central bay is engraved with Sino Western motifs including mythical beasts, sea waves, and five star patterns, a deliberate layering of Chinese cosmological imagery onto the sacred facade to make the church legible to local villagers, which means the facade no longer encodes a single Christian message but a polysemic field of protection and fortune [17]. Decorative replacement is also evident in both material and subject matter: Chinese scroll patterned flowers and mythical beasts replace Western Baroque marble saint narratives, shifting from religious narrative to Chinese architectural aesthetics. Structurally, the rewriting follows a "binary juxtaposition" compromise: a brick and wood mixed structure replaces the Western all stone system, and the Chinese style roof of grey tile sheets on wooden triangular trusses collages with the Baroque Western façade [17, 18].

This rewriting follows a cultural translation logic, not random replacement, as forms are adapted to local tectonic habits, visual grammar, and multi faith readability, producing a new hybrid genre that negotiates between Jesuit symbolism and Chinese spatial practice. The deeper motive is that Chinese craftsmen simulated Western columns and sculptural effects with local brick carving, avoiding direct transplantation of Western stone carving and creating a folk path of technical cultural translation [20]. Spatial layout follows the logic of "inwardness": Western Baroque churches usually occupy city squares in an outward posture, whereas the South Hall's layered courtyard sequence—Chinese gateways, shadow wall, stacked stone Virgin Mary mountain, and main hall—transforms the outward centered model into China's traditional inward courtyard model [19]. The political cultural context is that Matteo Ricci initially hid the church in a courtyard to avoid conflict; when Thomas F. Goldoni expanded it with the Shunzhi Emperor's support he retained Chinese details so the building would not overly deviate from Chinese ritual [21]; Kangxi's imperial inscription further completed the symbolic shift from "foreign religious place" to "Tianzhuan Temple" [21]. This reflects cultural competition—craftsmen employed local techniques for roof and courtyard while missionaries controlled the Western façade; the coexistence of two systems reveals the technical collision of Ming Qing architectural cultures.

Its structure is brick-wood, with blue brick walls and grey tile roofing, the whole executed in the "polished brick joints" technique [17]. On the main façade, brick-carved capitals imitate the Corinthian order, while door and window frames and the church emblem are also carved from this material; interior wooden columns are clad in boards painted to imitate marble veining [17]. The entrance gate and rear pavilion adopt Chinese tiling traditions—over-ridged grey cylindrical tiles and bell-shaped mountain tiles [17]. Compared with European Baroque stone systems, this material substitution replaces stone with brick and wood, marble sculpture with carved brick, and introduces Chinese courtyard tiling [19]. Its material system underwent five reconstructions: the 1650 Baroque church built under Johann Adam Schall von Bell, the rebuilding funded by the Qianlong Emperor after the 1775 fire, and the fifth reconstruction using Boxer Indemnity funds in 1904 [20]. Motivations include: direct imperial intervention and silver grants made the church accommodate court aesthetics, with this blue-grey palette tacitly responding to imperial culture [21]; diverse funding led to a mix of imported coloured glass and local brick-wood [22]; Chinese craftsmen reconstructed the material system by technical translation—painting boards to imitate marble and carving the capitals from brick [19]. In essence, the substitution functions as a mechanism of transcultural re-encoding: brick, wood, and tile are not mere surrogates but active carriers of imperial symbolism and craft knowledge. Material substitution did not weaken sacredness: the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

stacked stone Mount Mary serves Marian devotion through Chinese garden-making techniques, and Kangxi's imperial plaque proclaims faith in the traditional form of stelae and tablets [17].

The South Church sits inside Xuanwu Gate, facing north south, with a series of courtyards arranged in progressive sequence [17]. Unlike European Baroque churches that occupy city squares and face east west, it is embedded in the street layout, replacing the outward square with an inward courtyard and conforming to traditional Chinese etiquette [19]. Its spatial functions are highly complex: in the late Ming and early Qing it served as an observatory and library showcasing Western technology, a window for scholars to access Western learning; in the late Qing it was repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, and during the Cultural Revolution it was turned into a toy factory; it reopened in 1979 and undertook foreign affairs receptions and English Masses [21-23]. Xuanwu Gate was the route for southern scholars entering Beijing, and the church's location from the outset facilitated proximity to intellectual elites. Frequent prohibitions and religious education requirements demanded a compact spatial posture [21]. The "sit north–face south" orientation and the royally endorsed plaque integrated the church into the imperial ritual system, granting spatial legitimacy [17]. As its functions expanded from a single religious venue to a comprehensive space of cultural exchange, social service, and heritage, the South Church completed its transformation from "Western missionary outpost" to "Beijing urban cultural heritage" [23].

The main façade of the Guangzhou Sacred Heart Cathedral has a three part symmetrical layout: two tall spires, three bottom pointed arch perspective windows receding inward, and a hollow stone carved rose window nearly seven metres in diameter [24, 25]. Its rewriting follows a dual logic: the Western Gothic visual appearance is preserved, but the structural logic is replaced by Chinese timber framing. Sculpture reduction is tied to the technical background of construction supervisor Cai Xiao. The flying buttress is concise, without the sculptural hollowing out of Milan Cathedral [24]; the main façade has only simple lintel carvings, abandoning the elaborate saint sculptures of Chartres Cathedral [24]. Cai Xiao's team of Guangdong stone masons were skilled in traditional Chinese stone construction, not European sculpture; this technical gap forced façade simplification [26]. Lacking Western sculptural techniques, craftsmen used simple mouldings and geometric decorations, creating a solemn style. This simplicity is a proactive choice within technical limits, a translation using their most mature techniques. Structural rewriting is even more thorough: the stone chamber's wooden roof truss adopts the traditional Chinese raised beam structure, using beam column overlapping to simulate the visual and spatial effect of the Gothic arch roof (rather than its structural principles), replacing the customary European Gothic wooden truss system [26]. The raised beam retains the pointed arch but converts tension transmission to beam column support, a functionally equivalent translation. Thus the raised beam is an equally mature large span system; craftsmen made independent technical choices. Consequently, spires, flying buttresses, and rose windows remain as symbols of religious legitimacy, while sculpture and structural logic are translated through mature stonework and raised beams—a creative translation within technical limits that grows a unique work from the Lingnan mason lineage while keeping the Gothic spirit.

The exterior is entirely granite, quarried from Ngau Tau Kok in Hong Kong; it is the most magnificent all stone Gothic church in China [26]. Bonding material is glutinous rice oil mortar. The indoor floor is paved with Guangdong large step bricks to prevent moisture and slipping [26, 27]. Coloured glass was originally imported from France; after being damaged, it was restored in 2004 by custom making in the Philippines, totalling 98 panels [26]. Compared with European Gothic stone systems, material substitution here is: replacing European limestone with harder South China granite [26]; replacing lime mortar with glutinous rice oil mortar, continuing southern Chinese folk construction and providing waterproof, anti corrosion, and high strength bonding [24, 26]; replacing

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

stone floors with Guangdong large step bricks, solving moisture and slip problems in Lingnan's humid climate [24]. The humid Lingnan climate demands moisture, heat, and rain protection; glutinous rice oil mortar and large step bricks are climate adaptive choices [26]. Chinese craftsmen, familiar with local material techniques, used local systems to simulate Western effects—building granite with glutinous rice paste and using large step bricks—a technical translation, not a retreat [26]. Material substitution does not weaken sacredness: granite's permanence and the coloured glass light effects jointly serve religious transcendence, reproducing sacredness within the local material system [27].

The stone church stands on Dongde Road in Guangzhou, facing north and slightly eastward by five degrees, facing the Pearl River, and embedded in the old city's arcade block commercial fabric. It is adjacent to the salted fish and seafood wholesale market and has only a small front square [26, 28]. The original affiliated complex (hospital, nursery, school) was arranged as a courtyard [26]. Unlike European Gothic churches that face east and occupy city squares, the stone church abandoned Western religious orientation and conformed to China's "sit north–face south" etiquette, facing the mountain and river (north against Baiyun Mountain, south to the Pearl River), matching Chinese geographical layout [26, 29]. Though the bell tower is 58.5 metres tall, its visual dominance is dissolved by the dense arcade street texture [24]. The wall forms an inwardly curved semi arc, conforming to the auspicious "four waters flowing into one source"; the Virgin Mary side courtyard is complemented by Lingnan garden style pavilions, integrating church space into the local courtyard aesthetic tradition [27, 29]. The site was the former Guangdong Governor's Office; as a colonial symbol the church had to restrain its spatial posture—embedding in streets rather than occupying a square—to reduce visual provocation [26]. Situated in the core wholesale market area, historically surrounded by some African migrant communities, the church's religious and commercial spaces overlapped; these communities' local attachment gave it both religious and social functions, making it a social node and a gathering place for transnational communities [28]. Reflecting Guangzhou's coastal religious culture, the stone church embeds itself in urban daily life with an open attitude, embodying "openness" and "harmony" [29].

Saint Paul's Church deliberately maintained Gothic churches' most distinctive symbols: the main façade ends with pointed arch windows and double centred pointed arches, the bell tower reinforces upward momentum through vertically tapering lines, and exterior pilasters vertically divide and echo the vertical Gothic theme of British churches [30].

In classic Gothic, pointed arches, flying buttresses, and ribbed vaults form an inseparable stone structured logic, but Saint Paul's systematically rejected this chain. It kept pointed arch windows as a façade symbol but completely abandoned the pointed arch cross vault and flying buttresses, using instead a "common herringbone wooden roof truss," with horizontal thrust borne by brick arch galleries on the north and south sides [31]. The central hall is covered with a traditional Chinese raised beam wooden truss, replacing the Gothic "masonry" system with the local "framework" system [30].

This structural replacement directly rewrites the internal space experience: believers are no longer led vertically upward by piers and flying buttresses but are placed in a horizontal openness similar to traditional Chinese halls [30]. The wooden truss efficiently covers large spaces, transforming Gothic awe into hall like intimacy; solemnity remains, but intimacy outweighs loftiness. Designer Qi Zhaocang sought this balance between Western religious symbols and Chinese construction traditions: retaining Gothic symbols to confirm religious identity, while using structural replacement to make the building familiar and acceptable to Chinese believers in spatial

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

perception; his scheme was built by a local Nanjing construction factory, and the skills and experience of local craftsmen were systematically incorporated throughout [30].

On the material level, St. Paul's exterior shows a plain brick effect: lower bricks are darker, upper ones blue, creating a subtle colour difference layer; window frames and bell tower battlements are outlined with white stone, conveying material elegance [31]. Unlike Western Gothic's stone as eternity symbolism, St. Paul's replaces stone with brick and wood entirely: walls use blue bricks and old city wall bricks, and the roof is of wooden trusses instead of stone arches; only at visual focal points—window frames, bell tower battlements, and the altar—are high quality white feldspar stones from Zhenjiang retained [31]. This "less stone, more brick" layout directly stems from the rigid construction budget constraint—the total cost was only 12,000 US dollars, about 322 taels of gold [31]. Limited funds forced a value ranking: white stone outlines only the Gothic "face," while walls and trusses use cheap local brick and wood. Through this economic substitution, a deep semantic shift occurred: city wall bricks, as material fragments of the former imperial city's defence system, were widely used for the church base due to low cost and availability, which may be read as a shift from secular defence to sacred protection, providing a tangible local material foundation for foreign belief [30, 31]. At the altar, finely polished white feldspar stones were not engraved with Western saints' images but with Chinese scriptures and decorated with gold foil [30]. This replaced Western imagery with Chinese stone plaque and banner techniques, reproducing sacredness in local craft traditions and allowing believers to encounter faith through familiar text worship. Cheap local materials, through fine craftsmanship, offered cultural affinity; cost driven localisation activated the symbolic potential of city wall bricks and gold foil, advancing Nanjing's Christian localisation more effectively than missionary texts.

In the spatial dimension, Saint Paul's Church also underwent profound adjustments. Unlike European cathedrals that dominate skylines or retreat to public squares, it quietly integrates into the street layout of Nanjing's southern area, with its entrance hidden within a courtyard and courtyard walls separating the church from the street [30]. Canonical Gothic churches dominate with east west orientation and frontal squares; St. Paul's adopted a courtyard enclosure, creating an introverted religious spatial pattern. Such orientation and layout adaptations, while not universally standardized, commonly reflect local responses to urban fabric and cultural integration, as systematically documented in a survey of Christian churches in the Nanjing area [32]. This spatial rewriting reflects period pressure and functional change. The main church was completed in 1923, coinciding with the peak of the 1920s "Anti-Christian Movement" among Chinese intellectuals, with anti-religious sentiment and cultural rejection spreading nationwide. In this context, a landmark dominance posture that converges heterogeneity and quietly integrates into the community became a practical survival strategy [30]. During the War of Resistance, the church's function fundamentally shifted to a shelter for war refugees; during the Japanese occupation it was confiscated and turned into a Japanese language school, with religious activities suspended until reclaimed by the church after the victory [31]. From faith space to shelter to colonial school, this trajectory made the church a Nanjing building integrating Chinese timber logic, material memory, and survival wisdom, embodying the spatial shift from dominance to integration.

The South Hall's renovation focused on decoration, using brick carving, hemispherical column bases, and Chinese style courtyards to achieve dual encoding of cultural symbols [17]. The Stone Chamber retained the Gothic framework with intact flying buttresses and pointed arch systems, replacing only wooden roof trusses at the component level [26]. Saint Paul's Church underwent the most radical structural replacement, completely abandoning flying buttresses and pointed arch intersections and instead using gable wooden roof trusses and brick vaulted corridors to resist thrust,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

presenting a "structural localisation" [31]. Differences in motivations: the South Hall was most deeply influenced by imperial power under Kangxi and Qianlong, its morphological rewriting carrying strong political ritual colour [21]; the Stone Chamber presented a technical adaptation rewriting driven by Cai Xiao's stone mason identity and the Lingnan climate [26]; Saint Paul's Church was driven by economic rationality (12,000 US dollars) and local material constraints [31].

5. Discussion

The three churches share a three layer logic of form simplification, material substitution, and spatial restraint, rooted in similar political pressures, cultural conflicts, and technical constraints. Differences arise from local variables: imperial ritual and scholar culture for the South Church; Lingnan climate and commerce for the Stone Chamber; and economic rationality with community service for St. Paul's. This reveals that Christian art localisation in China is not uniform but regionally diverse, shaped by society, economy, politics, and climate. In essence, each church enacts a distinctive mode of cultural translation—decorative hybridization in Beijing, technical adaptation in Guangzhou, and structural localisation in Nanjing—demonstrating that vernacularisation is always a negotiation between global symbols and local forces.

In morphological rewriting, despite differences in degree, all three churches share a common logic of retaining core Western symbols: the South Church's Baroque arch window and curved cornice [17], the Stone Chamber's double pointed towers and flying buttresses [24], and Saint Paul's pointed arch windows and bell tower [31]. Yet all three simplify decorative density: the South Church uses brick carved scrolls, the Stone Chamber has minimal carving, and St. Paul's is "simple and elegant"—collectively breaking from Western elaboration. Structurally, all three abandon the Western stone structured arch system and replace it with traditional Chinese wooden construction: the South Church uses a wooden triangular truss to support a grey tile roof [17], the Stone Chamber replaces the European wooden truss with a raised beam framework [26], and Saint Paul's replaces intersecting pointed arches with a raised beam roof truss [31]. The common driving force behind these transformations is threefold: rising nationalism required reducing colonial colour to lower cultural conflict [26]; Chinese craftsmen's technical tradition caused the absence of sculptural craft and the natural implantation of Chinese details [20]; and the Confucian aesthetic of "subtlety and restraint" deeply contradicts Western visual flamboyance [19].

In material substitution, all three churches replaced Western stone with local materials: the South Church used blue bricks and a wooden roof structure, the Stone Chamber used Hong Kong granite, and Saint Paul's used Ming city wall bricks and blue bricks [17, 26, 31]. For bonding materials, the South Church early phase used traditional masonry, while the Stone Chamber and Saint Paul's adopted traditional lime mortar or glutinous rice–tung oil mortar [20, 26]. The material substitution follows a logic of "using local materials and applying skills accordingly": blue brick carving imitating stone sculpture, wood clad columns imitating marble, and city wall bricks polished to resemble stone together form a paradigm of cross cultural material translation [17, 26]. The common cultural logic lies in re producing religious sacrality through local material systems: blue brick carving translates Beijing's official language into a decorative grammar, glutinous rice–tung oil mortar sublimates Lingnan building wisdom into durable safeguard, and city wall bricks embed Nanjing's historical texture into the church foundation [17, 26, 31].

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Table 2. Material substitution strategies of the three churches

Case	Prototype Material	Local Substitute	Technical Driver	Cultural Meaning
South Church	Western stone (structural), marble columns, lime mortar	Blue bricks, wood clad columns, traditional masonry; grey tiles and bell-shaped roof tiles for courtyard	Local brick carving and timber framing traditions; craftsmen's decorative skills	"Western main body + Chinese courtyard" collage; aligns with imperial aesthetics via brick carving and stupa-like column bases
Stone Chamber	European limestone (structural), lime mortar, stone slabs	Hong Kong granite (full structure); glutinous rice–tung oil mortar (bonding); Guangdong large step bricks (flooring)	Lingnan granite quarrying; craftsmen's familiarity with local stone; climate-driven need for moisture/heat/rain protection	Closest to Western Gothic prototype; local materials re-produce sacred permanence while adapting to humid climate
Saint Paul's	Stone arches, stone sculpture, stone vaults	Ming city wall bricks + blue bricks (walls); white feldspar (only window frames, battlements, altar); cement tiles (roof)	Budget constraint (only $12,000); reuse of affordable demolished city wall bricks; local craftsmen's skill set	Greatest degree of substitution; city wall bricks embed historical texture into sacred foundation; "less stone, more brick" economy

Table note: South Church data from [17, 21]; Stone Chamber from [26]; Saint Paul's from [31].

Differences in motivations: the South Hall was most influenced by imperial aesthetics, its brick joint masonry and stupa column bases aligning with imperial ritual [21]; the Stone Chamber was most driven by the hot humid southern climate, with glutinous rice oil paste and large step bricks as climate adaptive choices [26]; Saint Paul's was most constrained by economy, with city wall brick reuse reflecting both cultural selection and cost control [31].

In spatial orientation, all three deviate from the Western model: the South Church faces north, aligned on a north-south axis with the main façade oriented northward [17]; the Stone Chamber faces south, with its main axis oriented southward and five degrees eastward [26]; and St. Paul's faces north, situated on a north-south axis with the main entrance at the northwest corner [31]. They shunned visual dominance, integrating into street fabric. In spatial layout, they all abandoned the "urban landmark + independent square" prototype and turned to courtyard style or street embedded patterns: the South Church comprises a Chinese style gate, Mount Mary, a two story courtyard, and an east cross court [17]; the Stone Chamber's affiliated complex is in courtyard layout [26]; St. Paul's is enclosed by a temple, bell tower, dormitories, and dining hall [31]. Common reasons: frequent incidents and rising nationalism required a restrained spatial posture; conforming to the "sit north–face south" ritual sought cultural identity; and functional complexity strengthened spatial local embedding—the South Church had an observatory and library, the Stone Chamber serves as a gathering place for some African migrant communities, and St. Paul's sheltered war refugees [21, 28, 31].

The South Hall has the most complex spatial hierarchy and a complete courtyard sequence, embodying the binary juxtaposition of "Chinese courtyard + Western main hall" [17]. The Stone Hall has the largest space, a 58.5 metre bell tower, with the Latin cross plan and flying buttresses fully preserved, but the orientation changed to north–south, presenting a "Western core + Chinese exterior" compromise [26]. Saint Paul's Hall has the smallest space, a bell tower only 18.2 metres

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

tall covered with vines, and its courtyard has the strongest inward orientation, being closest to the traditional Chinese courtyard [31]. Driving forces: the South Hall was significantly driven by imperial ritual and scholarly interaction—its Xuanwu Gate location facilitated contact with southern scholars, and the imperial inscription incorporated it into the court ritual system [21]; the Stone Hall was most influenced by commercial networks and cross border flows, with African immigrants giving it both religious and commercial network node functions [28]; Saint Paul's Hall was driven by the strongest need for community integration, adopting the most humble spatial posture [31].

6. Conclusion

Regarding the issue of how the localization process can visually translate in terms of form, materials, and space, this study reveals form simplification, material substitution, and spatial restraint, and presents a differential spectrum: Nan Temple is a dual encoding of brick and wood/yard; the Stone Room is a structural substitution achieved through the raised beam wooden framework; and the Saint Paul Church replaces the pointed arch, cross arch, and flying buttress with human-shaped wooden trusses and brick arches. These respectively reflect imperial rituals, the climate of Lingnan, and commerce, as well as economic rationality and community services, showing that localization is diverse regional differences. To theoretically capture these findings, this study unifies form rewriting, material substitution, and spatial shift into a three-dimensional framework (the formal layer of visual symbols, the material layer of the medium, and the structural layer of existence), providing an operational template. At the same time, site selection, orientation, and function are included to avoid the separation of form and space. In terms of practical implications, by incorporating Chinese artisans and local traditions, this study examines the Baroque column style imitated by Chinese artisans in brick carving, Cai Xiao's replacement of the Gothic truss with the raised beam framework, and the semantic transformation of the meaning of the Nanjing city wall bricks from defense to sacred protection. It fully focuses on the technical habits and active choices of artisans. The study also has several limitations: The data and images rely on public databases, lacking on-site investigations, which limits the grasp of material texture, scale, and on-site atmosphere; the cases are limited to urban Catholic churches (not including rural, remote small churches or Protestant churches), and the transferability has not been tested; to ensure quality and coverage of depth and dimension, the literature is selected, which may exclude records with weak theoretical awareness but rich information, restricting the breadth of sources.

This article takes Beijing Nan Temple, Guangzhou Shishi Saint Heart Cathedral, and Nanjing Saint Paul Church as typical cases, from the Ming and Qing dynasties to modern times, by means of form rewriting, material substitution, and spatial transformation, to examine the visual translation mechanism in the localization of Chinese Christian church art. The research shows that these localization practices are not passive acceptance or random modification of Western prototypes, but rather creative translations under multiple structural constraints. In terms of form, all three churches retain the core visual symbols of the Western prototype to maintain their religious identity, but significantly simplify the decoration and replace the Western stone arches with traditional Chinese wooden construction logic. In terms of materials, all three use local materials and apply craftsmanship based on the local materials, replacing Western stone materials with local materials, and re-generating the sacredness of religion within the local craft system. In terms of space, all three abandon the Western religious orientation and square format, and humbly integrate into the street layout, shifting to courtyard-style or street-integrated layout. Within this threefold logic framework, these churches present a clear lineage: Nan Temple was most deeply driven by imperial rituals, completing political and cultural coding through brick carvings and courtyard layout; Shishi was

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36260

located in a colonial context and under the humid climate of Lingnan, achieving functional equivalent structural translation through the raised beam wooden structure; Saint Paul Church faced financial and community pressure, undergoing the most thorough structural replacement. This lineage reflects the interaction of local variables such as imperial politics, economic costs, climate, and social functions. The above findings indicate that the localization of Chinese Christian church art is not a single model, but presents rich regional differences due to the interweaving of local social, economic, political, and climatic forces. More broadly, the three-dimensional framework of this article - from the outside to the inside of form adaptation, material substitution, and space reconstruction - provides a feasible path for understanding the cross-cultural transmission and transformation of religious visual culture. This article mainly relies on literature and image materials, and the grasp of on-site spatial perception and architectural material details is still limited, and needs to be supplemented and deepened in the future by combining field investigations..

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