

The Formalism Issue of Catholic Iconography in China

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Abstract: During the Republican period in China, the Catholic Church gradually developed and grew in China and made attempts to localize itself in different fields, one of which was the promotion of localized Catholic icon painting in the field of art. Due to the problem of divergence between Chinese and Western cultures and styles, formalistic expressions of these paintings emerged. As a representative practice of Catholic painting in China, Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University, with Chinese painting style as its main focus and Western style as its auxiliary, consciously innovated the expression of Catholic icon painting in China, however, in the expression of content and selection of subject matter, excessive emphasis was placed on Chinese visual language to cater to the tastes of Chinese audiences, and as the edifying function of Catholic painting failed to be exercised to a certain extent. There is still a certain degree of formalism. The development of Catholic painting in China needs to find a balance between the spirit of doctrine and Chinese visual culture, integrate Catholic aesthetics into the Chinese painting tradition, and create a new form of painting language, rather than the migration and appropriation of visual symbols.

Keywords: Catholic iconography, formalism, east-west art exchange, religious indigenization

1. Introduction

Christianity was first introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty, while the localization of Christian images began in the late Ming Dynasty and reached its peak in the Republican period [1]. During this period, not only were missionary activities further legitimized, but the Holy See also received a continuous revision in its missionary strategy. As the Christian Church grew in China, attempts were made to localize it in various areas, including the promotion of Christian iconography that was acceptable to Chinese audiences [2]. However, due to the change in social structure and the simplification of the art form, it did not continue. In any case, the attempts of artists in this period to localize Christian iconography are still worth our attention. Since the dominant force in the development of localized iconography in this period was Catholicism, the term Catholic will be used in subsequent texts to distinguish it to some extent from Protestantism.

However, just as there was a problem of formalism in the Catholic missionary approach in China, this issue was also present in Catholic iconography, where formalism refers to the apparent acculturation in the process of the localization of Catholic iconography, which ignores the spiritual integration with one culture and only superficially understands or recognizes the other culture [3,4].

As an important center of Catholic education in China at that time and the main institution for the practice of localization of Catholic painting in China, the artists of Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University consciously responded to this problem and made many innovative attempts, which also achieved great repercussions and were representative of Catholic iconography of that era. This paper gives an overview of the development of Catholic icon painting in the Republic of China, taking Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University as the main example, putting it into the context of the times and analyzing its innovative expression of Catholic icon painting and the still existing problems of formalism and its causes.

2. Historical Background

2.1. The Reformation of China Catholicism

The development of Catholicism in China has been difficult since the Opium War. At the beginning of the 20th century, although the number of Catholics grew, the form of survival was not optimistic. Since then, Catholicism has carried out several localization campaigns, including the localization of Catholic iconography, which is also essentially an attempt to save Chinese Catholicism.

In 1919, the encyclical “Maximum Illud” issued by Pope Benedict XV, which appealed against the impact of European nationalism on the Catholic Church in missionary territories and called on missionaries to integrate local culture and promote localization of the Church, marked the reaffirmation of the Catholic Church’s “localization” missionary route [5]. The reform addresses five main areas where Chinese Catholicism is currently struggling: (1) the relationship between religion and politics; (2) limitations on religious freedom; (3) cultural and traditional conflicts; (4) regional and ethnic differences; (5) contradictions within the Christian church.

However, in terms of its effectiveness, as the churchman Wang Zhixin commented, the localization movement of Christianity in China has always been formalistic which is just a means for Christianity to approach Chinese society, but it is not a fundamental method [6]. This formalism is also reflected in the Catholic iconography of this period.

2.2. The Rise of Iconography

Religious icons are an important element of the Catholic faith, with functions including promoting doctrine, inspiring faith, and shaping religious life. To regain its popularity among the Chinese public, the Catholic Church is increasingly focusing on culture and philanthropy. Religious icons began to appear in Catholic parishes, schools, and other places during the Republican period, becoming an important form of Catholic cultural dissemination.

In 1922, Pope Pius XI sent Celso Costantini to China as a religious representative to further promote the “localization” of Catholicism in China. Due to Costantini’s interest in art and his experience in religious art, Catholic iconography began to flourish in China under his guidance. He believed that Christian art should be integrated with Chinese art and advocated the use of indigenous art forms to express Christian art. According to his summary, Costantini’s suggestions for the development of localized Catholic art in China are mainly the following four: (1) the adoption of Western art in China is a wrong style; (2) the foreign style of art can only contribute to the prejudice that Catholicism is a foreign religion; (3) the great tradition of Catholic art indicates that local artistic styles should be adopted; (4) Chinese art offers various beautiful possibilities [3].

At his call, some local Chinese painters, represented by Chen Yuantu and Lu Hongnian, began to participate in the creation of religious icons, contributing to the localization of Chinese Catholic culture.

Overall, the localization of Catholic religious paintings in China during this period was mainly achieved through two institutions, whose images to some extent represent the characteristics of form and content of religious paintings at that time [7]. The first was the Tushanwan Orphanage in Xujiahui, Shanghai, which began to develop in the mid-19th century. The second was the Fu Jen Catholic University in Beiping (present-day Beijing), which started in the 1920s.

Tushanwan Painting Studio, located in the south, was based on Western painting education and style, and incorporates Chinese characteristics in its imitation of Western oil painting. A representative one is Liu Bizhen's "Chinese Madonna and Child". The original of this painting has been lost and only the print remains. It can be seen that this painting is clearly based on Raphael's Madonna and Child, and the pose of the Virgin embracing the Son is in line with Western painting traditions. But at the same time it certainly reveals a Chinese interest: the costumes of the figures are from the Qing Dynasty and the furnishings of the house are all Chinese. It can also be noticed that the painting is more plain in contrast between light and dark than the usual Western paintings, with flatter colors and an emphasis on line. In terms of painting technique, Liu Bizhen uses perspective and chiaroscuro from the West, but also incorporates the same characteristics of Chinese folk painting [8]. This brings scenes from the Bible into Qing Dynasty life and makes this artistic tradition from the West more accessible to Chinese audiences. This work is a typical Chinese practice of late Qing icon painting, and at the First Chinese Church Conference in 1924, the painting was considered "the standard Chinese Madonna and Child".

However, the problem is also obvious: the works of this institution place too much emphasis on the imitation of Western oil painting and the construction of iconographic standards for the figure, instead cutting off the two cultures [9]. The Madonna was depicted with several principles at that time: she was dressed in Chinese queen's costume, so that she would have the grace and elegance of a Chinese queen; she had the charitable face of the Madonna; she was seated on a throne - the Chinese model of the Great Master's chair; and the Jesus beside the Madonna should also have the dignity and seriousness of Chinese culture. While these criteria enable the Chinese audience to understand the importance and character of the Madonna and Child, that part of biblical culture which belongs to the Catholic tradition is clearly not represented, and the representation of the Holy Light, which is most important in Catholic painting, is here concealed. The light that guides the truth and the way is neglected here, and it is clear that the painting does not go for a similar representation of sanctity through other means, so that the Madonna and Child are closer to the earth. At the same time, because of the emphasis on the character templates, the narrative meaning belonging to Chinese painting is also obscured.

Fu Jen Catholic University in the 20th century did much better on this point, with its faculty and students consisting mostly of traditional Chinese painters. In its overall strategy, while their works incorporated some characteristics of Western painting, they were mostly expressed in Chinese ink and brushwork or composition. However, their themes mainly focused on the choice of Chinese and Western visual symbols and also created a unique form of Christian art.

In general, the Catholic Church during the Republican period strengthened its missionary activities in China in the context of localization and cultural development and spread the Catholic faith more widely in China through iconography and other forms. As a religious visual art, there are three requirements for it: (1) explain religious themes clearly; (2) explain religious themes in a way that moves the soul; (3) explain religious themes in a form that is easy to remember [8]. In this period, Catholic iconography was consciously localized, so that Catholic themes could be understood by Chinese audiences in this way. The following will take Furen University in Beijing as an example to analyze its formalism issue.

3. Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University

3.1. Concept and Practice

Presiding over the founding of Fu Jen Catholic University in Beiping was one of Costantini's great contributions to the localization of Catholicism. Under his leadership, the artists of Fu Jen Catholic University, represented by Chen Yuantu, carried out concrete practices in icon painting, church decoration, and textbook illustration, and achieved a certain influence.

At the beginning of the establishment of Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University in the 1930s, the purpose of the university was clearly defined, which was to introduce the best of the newly acquired science and culture in Western Europe, and to preserve the best of the old Chinese literature and art, and to take the best from the short, not to make [10]. The icon paintings he made also embodied this same idea, compared to Tushanwan Painting Studio, Chen Yuantu, and his students noticed the subjective character of Chinese painting and distinguished it from the plastic or realistic school of painting. In the Catholic painting tradition, painters often wished to use accurate and realistic techniques to depict, to enhance the persuasive power of religious subjects. However, in Chinese painting, the figure focuses on the form of god, to a certain extent out of reality, to shape the temperament of the figure, to reproduce the spirit of the figure. Besides, they tried to create a Catholic school of painting, just like the Chinese Buddhist and Taoist schools of painting, to integrate Catholicism into the world of Chinese art.

In terms of painting methods, Chen Yuan Du insisted on depicting the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. It can be seen that in most of the paintings of the artists from Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University, a flat and far-reaching composition was chosen, and the techniques used such as chapping and dabbing, shaping with lines, etc., all of which can be found in the traditional Chinese painting as their models. At the same time, the relationship between perspective and light and darkness, which belong to the tradition of Western painting, can also be seen in the expression of details, as well as in the addition of vibrant colors to the main figures. These methods enhance the narrative nature of the pictures, make the Western hope of Catholic painting achieve the "immersive" purpose in the Chinese way, and achieve the role of icon painting as a visual expression of the Bible.

This is also reflected in the choice of painting materials, as most of them choose silk as the basic material for painting, which is also the material commonly used in Chinese Song Dynasty painting. The absorbency of this material is between that of raw and cooked Xuan, which makes it more suitable for a workmanlike painting method [11]. In practice, it can give full play to the advantages of line expression in Chinese painting and the advantages of color in Western painting and can show the dual functions of narrative and expression of the work in a relatively comprehensive way.

Their most obvious and important contribution is their attempt to translate Chinese and Western visual symbols. Take the angel Annunciation above as an example, it can be seen that this picture continues the idea of temporal and spatial substitution of Tushanwan, but the artist directly uses the traditional Chinese painting technique of portraying women, making the Virgin more subtle in the sense that she belongs to a Chinese woman. At the same time, it is also possible to notice the auspicious clouds under the feet of the angel Gabriel. Although the Chinese audience may be unfamiliar with the angel's wings, they can quickly associate the identity of the visitor with the cloud: this must be a divine being from heaven. For those with more knowledge, the wings also tell him that this is the angel Gabriel's Annunciation of Mary, not the traditional Chinese myth of the Child Sending Guanyin.

Besides, the traditional inscriptions on Chinese paintings also help the viewer to understand the content of the picture. By reading the inscriptions, one can quickly understand the message conveyed by the picture. For example, in the picture above, the image of the Madonna is marked in the upper

left corner with the words “The Great Madonna blesses us”, which is a straightforward way of advertising, and to a certain extent has contributed to the spread of the Catholic faith in China.

3.2. Formalism

Even though the faculty and students at Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University were aware of the differences between Chinese and Western painting traditions and made a good integration of traditional Chinese painting techniques with Western techniques, however, there was still a formalistic part in the selection of subject matter and the expression of connotations.

First of all, in terms of subject matter, the artists of Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University mostly chose the Madonna and the icon family as the subject matter of their paintings. Other subjects that were very important in Western Catholic paintings, such as the crucifixion and the weeping of Jesus, although there were also very good paintings with obvious Christian symbols such as the crucifix and the holy ambassadors in the picture, they were fewer in number in the overall works and were not widely popular at that time. This may be a strategy adopted to dispel this cultural difference and make it more acceptable to ordinary viewers, considering the traditional Chinese society’s emphasis on the concept of family affection and its unfamiliarity with Catholic culture [11]. However, it is clear that, due to the limitations of their choice of subject matter, the iconography at Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University does not fully convey the more distinctive Christian teachings that have little relevance to Chinese tradition.

The same goes for the artists’ treatment of the figures, in which a distinctly orientalized character can be seen. For example, in the representation of the Madonna, these paintings draw on traditional Chinese paintings such as Guanyin, so that the image of the Madonna with the Holy Child in her arms is close to the Chinese painting of Guanyin sending her son in the context of the painting. Such paintings with blessings were long popular in civil society, so even Chinese viewers unfamiliar with Christian doctrine could easily understand the beautiful connotations of the paintings. This kind of formalism is only a means to approach the psychology of Chinese viewers, but it is not a fundamental method and does not contribute to the dissemination of doctrine. Costantini’s idea of “Chineseizing its form but leaving its substance” obviously failed to materialize [12]. On the other hand, the excessive association with the story of Guanyin, that makes the viewer think about the content of the picture is not only detrimental to the expression of the original biblical story, but also creates ambiguity. So does the accumulation of traditional Chinese visual symbols in the background. Although some painters at that time were aware of this and tried to show more Christianity-related content in kind of works with Chinese painting tradition to achieve their missionary purpose, these religious elements did not appear to interact in the picture contents and remained formalistic in the absence of cultural background.

Apart from that, it can be seen that these painters try to translate the Western painting language of perspective and light and darkness into the painting language of color and ink, color and line. But it is inevitable that in the fusion of techniques, one must face the dissipation of the sacred space brought by perspective and the guiding nature brought by sacred light. In these works at Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University, the Chinese presentation gives the images a more narrative characterized by long scrolls, but this formal transformation seems to have difficulty in taking care of this deeper Catholic culture.

In fact, although these paintings were widely spread, they did not bring the expected response, and the Chinese audience did not know the true meaning of such paintings. As the Professor Gu Weimin pointed out, in the early 20th century, due to the neglect of the localization process and the lack of cultural education, there were not many intellectuals in the Chinese Catholic Church, and even fewer were able to appreciate the painstaking efforts of Costantini, Chen Yuantu and others on an artistic level [13]. It is because the roots of Catholicism in China are still shallow and it has not formed a

deep cultural integration with Chinese culture, so even how it borrows a lot of Chinese symbols, it is only “a means to approach Chinese society”. In contrast, the spread of Buddhist and Taoist art in China incorporated purity and Zen into the Chinese literati painting system. Therefore, the development of Catholic painting in China needs to find a balance between the spirit of doctrine and Chinese visual culture, integrate Catholic aesthetics into Chinese painting tradition, and create a new form of painting language, not just the migration and appropriation of visual symbols.

4. Conclusion

In the process of localization, the difficulties and challenges faced by Catholic painting have begun to emerge, among which the problem of “formalism” is particularly prominent. They are manifested in the form of stereotyped Catholic icon painting, rigid painting style, and patterned content. The emergence of these problems is closely related to the historical background, cultural differences, and artistic heritage of Catholic painting in the process of localization in China. In the practice of Catholic painting at Beiping Fu Jen Catholic University, innovations in artistic style were made in response to these problems, but they focus too much on the conversion of Chinese styles and there was still a formalistic aspect in the subject matter and content. As a Catholic painting, the function of enlightenment has failed to play to a certain extent. While people can be pleased to find that in contemporary times, Chinese Christian paintings are making new attempts. These paintings are more concerned with doctrinal and other spiritual interpretations, presenting divine emotions in water and ink. There are also painters of non-Christian faiths who are also engaged in the creation of representations related to Christian culture. Popular understanding of and interest in Christian culture had grown, and certain words from Christian culture and their connotations, such as lamb, light, cross, fruit and serpent, were integrated into the lives of Chinese audiences. On this soil, Christian iconography, which failed to develop in the 1940s, may be able to regain its glory in contemporary times.

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