

Portraying Our Lady of China: An Alternative Visual Modernity in China

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the icon of “Our lady of China”, which was initiated in the early 20th century, to explore the possibility of an alternative visual modernity that mixed together Chinese and western visual cultures as a new one. Through examination of the patronage and reception of its earlier model of “Our lady of Donglü”, this paper concentrates on the beginning of the encountering of traditional and foreign cultures that exemplified by the icon in China during the early 20th century, to delve into the multiple social and historical contexts within which the modern ways of seeing were shaped in native China. The argument is that it is the 20th-century icon of “Our lady of China” that at last effectively visualized the specific Chinese notion of taking Madonna as “Mother Emperor”, which pursuit could trace back to the centuries-long Sinicization of the western icon of “Maria Regina”. The conclusion is that the icon of “Our lady of China” conveys both realistic and Christianized modernity, while at the same time it also distinguishes with several current typical narratives of modernity. In this sense, the icon of “Our lady of China” provides us a kind of so-called “alternative visual modernity” in the process of visual enlightenment in China in the early 20th century.

Key words: Our lady of China, Our lady of Donglü, Maria regina, visual modernity, Tushanwan (Tou-se-we)

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The title “Our Lady of China” (Notre Dame de Chine) was born in May of 1924, at the first Synod of Bishops in China held in Shanghai. During the conference, at the proposal of Cardinal Celso Costantini, the plenary council unanimously adopted the portrait of the Virgin Mary housed in the local church in Donglü, Baoding as the official icon of “Our Lady of China.” Along with the newly designated title, the image, produced by the painting workshop at Tushanwan, subsequently graced various local and international exhibitions, fairs, and religious spaces in the form of paintings and sculptures. It was also mass reproduced by the Tushanwan workshops into prayer cards, illustrations, postcards, and small religious statues, widely distributed and sold across China and abroad. In June 2019, the Palace Museum presented the “Beyond Boundary” craftsmanship exhibition in its Meridian Gate Gallery (*wumen* 午門). The exhibition featured an exquisitely framed embroidery portrait of Mary (Fig.1), with the inscription that reads “Our Lady of China” (*Zhonghua shengmu* 中華聖母) embroidered at the bottom. Another oil painting of the same subject (Fig.2) from 1924 was also on display in the Gate of Divine Prowess Gallery (*shenwumen* 神武門). Part of the Vatican Museums collection, the oil portrait was signed “TSW” (Tushanwan).

Having emerged at the turn of the 20th century, Our Lady of China not only presents a distinctive model of an indigenous religious icon but also represents a visual phenomenon that grew in tandem with China’s process of modernization, marked by a mixture of local and foreign influences. While its history and iconography await systematic examinations, it raised many questions regarding the construction of visual modernity in China, which deserve even further investigations. For example, commissioned and designated by European missionaries, the image was regarded as a symbol of Sinicized Christian art. What visual signifiers have been adopted to exemplify an “artistic” and “Chinese-looking” image? What kind of imagination for the cultural “Other” is embedded in



(Left) Fig.1 *Embroidered Portrait of Our Lady of China*, embroidery, Private Collection of Tong Bingxue
 (Right) Fig.2 Tushanwan (TSW), *Our Lady of China*, 1924, oil on canvas, the Vatican Museums

such signifiers, for both China and the West? What common ground have the two parties managed to find through collaboration, that led to innovations in the visual sphere? Moreover, founded upon the integration and mutual understanding of divergent visual cultures, what kind of iconographic lineage does the image bear, and in what way is this tradition an amalgamation of the visual memories and imaginations of both China and the West? Ultimately, why, how, and to what extent does “Our Lady of China,” created with what today seems to be a conventional and undeveloped “realism,” become a unique representation of the Chinese modernity in the local context of the early 20th century?

1. Origin: What Constitutes “Artistic” and “Chinese-Looking”?

Regarding the reasons behind the commissioning of the devotional portrait to Our Lady of China, there exists a generally believed backstory. In 1908, Father Rene Flament, who had just become the pastor of the Donglü church in Baoding, wanted a more “regal, Chinese-looking” Madonna painting for the church. The finished canvas would later become widely recognized as *Our Lady of Donglü* (東閩聖母).⁽¹⁾ However, J.M.Trémolin’s accounts reveal the existence of devotional images in the Donglü church before 1908. When the church opened in 1902, it already housed a Madonna painting made by a local virgin. Madonna and the child are depicted in the center of the canvas, flanked by Father Giron holding an image of the newly built church on one side and the local Christians of all genders and ages on the other.⁽²⁾ One could hardly argue that this image – painted by the local virgin and depicting

(1) The main source on which the current scholarship is based is a series of articles on Our Lady of Donglü and Our Lady of China published in *Le Bulletin Catholique de Pékin* (Beijing, 1925-1933). Jean-Paul Wiest, “Marian Devotion and the Development of Chinese Christian Art During the Last 150 Years,” in *Multi-aspect Studies on Christianity in Modern China*, edited by the Institute of Modern History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, and KU Leuven Centre for Nanhuairen Studies, Belgium (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2011), pp. 200-202. Song Zhiqing, *Zhonghua Shengmu Jingli Shihua* (Tainan: Wendao Publishing House, 2005), pp. 81-83.

(2) Jean-Paul Wiest, “Marian Devotion and the Development of Chinese Christian Art During the Last 150 Years”, pp.200-201.

Zhang Xiaoyi, “From Mother Empress to Our Lady of China: Behind the Display of TSW’s Our Lady of China at the World’s Fair,” in the *Journal of Catholic Studies (Tianzhujiao yanjiu lunji)*, Issue 12, eds. Beijing Institute of Catholic Culture, 2015, p.193.

local prayers – is not “Chinese-looking.” Nevertheless, Father Flament still considered that the painting “lacks artistic quality and elegance in style. Its crowded composition and vague subject matter fail to achieve a sense of regality and is not suitable as a sacred icon for a church.”⁽³⁾ Therefore, for Father Flament, the ideal image of Our Lady should not just embody Chinese characteristics in a random sense, but be “artistic” while “Chinese-looking.”

What, then, constitutes an “artistic” “Chinese look”? The reference images sent by Father Flament to the painting workshop at Tushanwan give out some clues. The two images included a reproduction of Ingres’s renowned painting *The Virgin Adoring the Host* (*Vierge à l’Hostie*, currently housed in the Musée d’Orsay in France), as a reference for depicting the face, and a photographic portrait of the Empress Dowager Cixi for the costume.⁽⁴⁾ From them, it becomes clear that the “Chinese look” as conceived by Father Flament does not imply a Madonna with a Chinese-looking face, but a Mary in the style of Ingres, dressed as a Chinese empress. In the 1854 painting by Ingres, the virgin stares downwards timidly, her face calm and serene, displaying a sense of humbleness during worship. However, Father Flament decided to replace the virgin’s modest dress with the empress’s gown, intentionally emphasizing the grandeur of the costume as “Chinese-looking.” It can thus be argued that, first, the “artistic” quality is judged by the standards set by the French Neoclassical school, most prominently by Ingres, who is known for his Orientalist paintings. Secondly, the “Chinese look” refers neither to a Chinese-looking face, nor the day-to-day outfits worn by the Chinese. Rather, it is represented by the indigenous clothing that could manifest the highest authority at the time.

Such an idea of westernized Chinese style is likely related to Western missionaries’ actual experiences with clothing in China.⁽⁵⁾ In the late Qing Dynasty where Father Flament lived, clothing was a set of vernacular visual codes that communicated social status, cultural hierarchies, and power structures. As a strategy in visual communications, it inherited the logic behind the design of the special “Confucian dress,” which emerged during the period when Matteo Ricci lived in China and intended to identify the missionaries as “Western literati.” What Father Flament demanded was not simply a Chinese dress, but the gown that belonged to the Empress Dowager. Symbolizing the highest order of female clothing in China, it could best embody the majesty of Madonna. However, the black and white photograph from Father Flament certainly failed to provide a reference to the costume’s colors for the painter.⁽⁶⁾ Whether to adopt the bright, imperial yellow, the color of the highest honor of the Qing royal family, or adhere to the traditionally used blue in Western depictions of Madonna, as seen in Ingres’s painting? the Tushanwan painter eventually chose the latter, since yellow is often associated with sinful acts such as lies, betrayal, and jealousy in the tradition of Christian art.⁽⁷⁾

In addition, as far as oil painting is concerned, with the arrival of the Jesuits during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the medium had been featured in exhibitions and moderately popularized. The Qing imperial palace also had the tradition of creating, collecting, and displaying oil paintings. However, before the 1820s, oil painting remained a highly alien import to most ordinary Chinese, and oil paint relied entirely on imports, with

(3) Song Zhiqing, *Zhonghua Shengmu Jingli Shihua*, p. 82.

(4) Zhu Zuohao, *Chao Shengmu Jiannan* (Shanghai: Tushanwan Publishing House, 1934), p. 29. Jean-Paul Wiest, “Marian Devotion and the Development of Chinese Christian Art During the Last 150 Years”, p. 201.

(5) Zhu Zuohao, *Chao Shengmu Jiannan* (Shanghai: Tushanwan Publishing House, 1934), pp. 29.

(6) Although many believed this image was a photograph of an oil portrait of Cixi, originally painted by the American painter Katherine Carl, according to the comparison in color and style, as well as the available material evidence and a portrait of Cixi published by *Father Flament* on French Magazine, it was supposed to be a black and white photograph gifted to Alice Roosevelt, daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, by Cixi. A colored version appeared on the cover of the French newspaper *L’illustration* on June 20, 1908.

(7) Michel Patoureaux, *The History of a Color: Yellow* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 111-128.

very limited colors and varieties.⁽⁸⁾ Despite the difficulty in procuring the materials, Father Flament insisted on using oil painting as the medium for portraying Our Lady of China. This insistence is rooted in the tradition of Western visual culture, where paintings are inherently an inseparable constituent of “fine art” and “high art.” Simultaneously, it also stems from the Western definitions of “art” and “artistic,” which are measured by the ability to render “realistically,” at which the painting medium tends to excel. In advocating a “Chinese-looking” portrait of Our Lady, Father Flament adopted the costume of Cixi to evoke the female figure of the highest authority; the blue color typical of portraying Madonna’s gown to reinforce the Christian visual tradition; and the Western medium of painting. These decisions had in fact facilitated an iconographic innovation, by incorporating visual symbols from both Chinese and Western cultures.

Embodying the Western canon of art and the tradition of a systemized visual culture, the medium of oil painting counted toward Father Flament’s definition of “artistic” quality. As mentioned above, he further explained the icon’s lack of aesthetic with respect to its artistic style, composition, and functionality: the image must be done elegantly, without any roughness. It needs to establish a clear composition with its figures and should not be too crowded. It should suit the purpose of religious services, rather than of the public’s entertainment. It is easy to tell that Father Flament deemed the portrait made by the local virgin as “roughly made, compositionally chaotic, and lacking a religious seriousness.” However, according to Father Song Zhiqing, contrary to Father Flament’s sentiment, the Chinese people were not opposed to this portrait but were fond of it. Nevertheless, when the Tushanwan painter completed the commissioned portrait of Our Lady of Donglü, the Chinese responded with a higher degree of “fondness,” even “astonished” by it, as if underwent a visual shock.⁽⁹⁾

From the local reception of the two portraits of Our Lady, one discerns a general acceptance, disregarding whether it is a folk painting made by a local virgin, or an astounding, “artistic,” and “Chinese-looking” portrait made at the requirement of the missionary. As Song explains, “It was because they had never encountered a more beautiful icon. In fact, it [the first portrait] was mediocre.”⁽¹⁰⁾ This was the reason that “Father Flament wanted a more attractive icon, so as to manifest the beauty of Madonna.”⁽¹¹⁾ The newly appointed Father Flament played a crucial role in substituting the Madonna portraits: he was resolute in replacing the portrait that was already accepted by the locals, insisting that the image was too crowded and less presentable for church – that there was an urgent need for a more solemn image with a well-defined composition to fit a sacred space like church. The missionaries were looking for a truly infectious aesthetic in religious icons, which should be reflected in the images’ ability to attract the prayers’ gaze, and thereby immerse the religious in a sacred experience. This aesthetic is deeply rooted in the Jesuit visual tradition, longstanding as a major tool for Jesuit missions abroad since the Age of Discovery.⁽¹²⁾

The Western aesthetic distinguishes itself for its mastery of realism, creating images with “life-like” vividness. Introduced to Western art in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, China experienced a common visual shock. Emperor Wanli once marveled at an oil portrait of the Virgin Mary, comparing it to a “living immortal

(8) Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, “The Tushanwan Painting Studio and Western Painting Supplies,” in *Chongshi lishi suipian: Tushanwan yanjiu ziliao cuibian* (Beijing: Beijing Opera Press, 2010), pp. 238.

(9) Song Zhiqing, *Zhonghua Shengmu Jingli Shihua*, pp. 129.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Evonne Levy, “Early Modern Jesuit Arts and Jesuit Visual Culture: A View from the Twenty-First Century,” in *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, Vol. 1 (2014), pp. 66-87.

(活神仙)。”⁽¹³⁾ The literati and scholars also praised the portrait as “almost alive (其貌如生)” and “a bright mirror reflecting her likeness, as if moving (如明镜涵影, 踽踽欲动)。”⁽¹⁴⁾ While religious images provide more than just an aesthetic experience, a striking visual impression tends to be a potent means of achieving transcendence and epiphany. Therefore, an impactful aesthetic delivery often predicated the success of a mission. For example, when Matteo Ricci founded the first mission station in Zhaoqing, Guangdong in the 16th century, the locals all spontaneously knelt in front of a portrait of Madonna to worship it, attracted by its “life-likeness.”⁽¹⁵⁾ In the 17th century, upon an “extraordinarily beautiful” portrait of Virgin Mary, Xu Guangqi felt “his heart and soul were connected, reaching a moment of epiphany (心神若接, 默感潜孚).” Soon after, he was baptized and converted to Christianity. And in the 18th century, in a letter written by French Jesuit Jean Francoise Foucquet, “Based on what I know about the Chinese, if we could make the religious rites more splendid, it would be more attractive to the Chinese ... The beautiful religious icons brought from France this year have deeply touched all Christians.”⁽¹⁶⁾ In fact, the above descriptions of the “artistic” share the same tradition with the visual and aesthetic canon established since the Renaissance.

Thus, if we consider Father Flament’s commissioning of a new Madonna icon in 1908 as the origin of an artistic project, in deciding what constitutes “artistic” and “Chinese-looking,” we must first recognize the central role of the then dominant visual episteme of the West, assumed by the missionaries. Within it, the process of deciding what is worth looking at and what is not – that is, what is “art” and “artistic,” and what is legitimately “Chinese-looking” – naturally involved the gaze of the Other. It was simultaneously a transcultural reconstruction, where the Western visual culture reconfigured the visual tradition of its Other; and an effective path, along which the modern Western civilization built a globalized network.

Even so, this foreign transplantation of the Western iconographic paradigm should not be wholly equated to the manifestation of colonial and political power. Through a series of interpretations and misinterpretations, images’ inherent multiplicity of meanings, fluidity, and mobility often became a propellant for diversifying and innovating the visual culture of modern China. After all, the gaze does not operate one-sidedly. It works only when the audiences are in “deep resonance.”⁽¹⁷⁾ From this perspective, even the Chinese who lacked knowledge of foreign art were not passive recipients, being unilaterally transformed by the so-called colonial discourse. Rather, they actively inhabit such visual experiences. During the encounter of local traditions and foreign visual culture, a unique, local visual paradigm gradually came into shape. It was neither entirely traditional nor entirely foreign, swinging between modern and classical. In essence, it embodied a synthesis of East and West, where the Self and the Other existed in symbiosis, eventually becoming a part of China’s visual enlightenment in the 20th century.

(13) Matteo Ricci, *Li madou quanji: li madou zhongguo chuanjiao shi* (Taipei: Guangqi Publishing House, Fu Jen Catholic University Press, 1986), trans. Luo Yu, pp. 347.

(14) Gu Qiyuan, “Kezuo zhuiyu,” in *Xu xiu siku quanshu*, Volume 1260 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1995), pp.192.

Jiang Shaoshu, “Wusheng shishi,” in *Xu xiu siku quanshu*, Volume 1065 (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1995), pp.579.

(15) Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *Li madou zhongguo zhaji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2010), trans. He Gaoji et al., pp.168.

(16) Li Duo, “Xu wending gong xing shi,” in *Zhongxi wenhua huitong diyiren: Xu Guangqi xueshu yantaohui lunwen ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2006), eds. Song Haojie, pp. 231.

(17) Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Yesuhuishi zhongguo shujian ji* (Zhengzhou: Daxiang Publishing House, 2001), trans. Zheng Dedi et al., pp. 225.

2. Iconography: Tracing “Maria Regina” and Local Innovations in Its Visual Representation

Despite the differences in details, the existing portrayals of Our Lady of China were overall constructed similarly: Virgin Mary is dressed in a blue gown in the style of the Empress Dowager Cixi, wearing a Western crown, holding a scepter decorated with irises. Her throne is raised with steps, flanked by lilies and roses on each side. These common iconographies are the central visual cues of an Our Lady of China icon, which, regardless of their divergent details, unified these various depictions, gaining them equal legitimacy within the church, to be circulated widely. Whether it was the commission of the painting by the French priest Rene Flament in 1908, or the Italian cardinal Celso Costantini’s designation of it as the icon of Our Lady of China in 1924, European missionaries at the time were preoccupied with “localizing” the icon, while maintaining the Western iconographic traditions. In this painting, the plain veil in the Ingres original is replaced by a magnificent crown. Our Lady of China holds an iris-shaped scepter in her right hand, while her left hand was put around the child Jesus, who stands on her knees. The crown, scepter, and throne are a trinity of visual symbols that stand for power, running through the many iterations of Our Lady of China.

The crowned Madonna, or “Maria Regina,” was not a Chinese invention. This iconographic type has existed in Western Christian art since the Middle Ages, along with the emergence of Marian Devotion, it flourished during the Gothic period, as seen in the monumental statue of the Virgin Mary at Norte-Dame de Paris in the early 14th century. In these early examples (such as *The Blue Virgin* at Notre Dame de la Belle Verrière from the early 12th century), Mary is usually depicted frontally, in a pose that was also adopted in the portrayal of Our Lady of China. In addition to the baby Jesus cradled in her arms, Mary sometimes appears with a scepter decorated with lilies in her hand (as seen in the 14th century *Virgin of Jeanne d’Evreux*, housed in the Louvre), a motif that symbolized regality and authority. Generally speaking, the early development of this iconography in Western Christian art was accompanied by the shift in representation, moving from the “Byzantine Empress” in the art from the Near East to the “Western Queen” popular in Catholic art.⁽¹⁸⁾

Tracing the evolution of Marian representations in China, the image of Our Lady of China from the early 20th century established the first instance in the tradition of Sinicized Christian iconography, where “Maria Regina” was represented visually. The earliest Marian image in China was found on Katarina Vilioni’s tombstone in Yangzhou (Fig.3). The tomb dates back to the 14th century but was only rediscovered in the 1950s.⁽¹⁹⁾ The image depicts Mary sitting on a Chinese-style “throne.” Jesus, sitting on her lap, is held by her left hand, while her right hand is placed on her chest. The depiction follows the iconographic type of “Virgin Hodegetria,” which was then popular in Italy.⁽²⁰⁾ In Byzantine art, “throne” often connotes “royal power.”⁽²¹⁾ However, when the motif is translated into a large, unadorned Chinese seat without a backrest, it no longer signifies regal status and supreme power in the Chinese context. The gowns of Mary and Jesus are represented with plain lines, and there is

(18) Marion Lawrence, “Maria Regina”, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Jun., 1925), pp.161.

(19) Francis Rouleau, “The Yangchow Latin Tombstone as a Landmark of Medieval Christianity in China,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17 (1954), pp. 346-356.

(20) Developed from the “Byzantine style,” this Christian iconography arrived in the East through Crusader Art. It became popular in Italy in the 1280s and maintained its popularity until Renaissance.
Wu Qiong, “Virgin Hodegetria and the Formation of Vernacular Paintings During the Italian Renaissance,” in *Yishu xue yanjiu* (Issue 4, 2020), pp. 60-67.

(21) *Ibid*, pp.61-63.



Fig.3 Rubbing of the tombstone unearthed in Yangzhou, with Latin inscriptions and a depiction of the Virgin, 1342, Yangzhou Museum

no portrayal of a scepter or a crown. With such, this Sinicized icon failed in translating the power and noble status of Madonna. Based on the location where the tombstone was unearthed, it is assumed that it was buried in the city walls only half a century after it was made.⁽²²⁾ After all, since the tomb belonged to a foreign merchant family, the image of “Virgin Hodegetria” on a throne struggled to generate a wide and long-lasting impact in China. From the introduction of Christianity in the Tang Dynasty to its prevalence during the Mogol reign, it is generally believed that the activities of Marian devotions and depictions were only carried out among the Hu people. The situation was fundamentally changed with the arrivals of the Jesuits and Torahs in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty.⁽²³⁾

Influenced by the Jesuit mission of “cultural adaption,” Christianity made its third entry into China at the turn of the Qing Dynasty. While the Chinese found it difficult to understand the imagery of a half-naked, crucified Jesus and the claim that he was “a traitor,” the story and image of the Virgin Mary were received more widely, becoming one of the powerful tools for the Jesuit mission.⁽²⁴⁾ ⁽²⁵⁾ Towards the end of the 16th century, the Chinese living in Nanjing commonly believed that the “Lord” is a woman who holds an infant. Some even mistook the Christian God for the Buddhist Guanyin.⁽²⁶⁾ Exemplified by Matteo Ricci, the first wave of Jesuit missionaries catered to the “upper-class” in their mission. Identifying as the “Western literati,” they promoted Christian doctrines in China by introducing to local officials and scholars the latest achievements in Western science, humanities, and art, including the paintings of the Virgin Mary. In 1601, Ricci gifted Emperor Wanli two paintings of the Virgin, which

(22) Xia Nai, “Yangzhou lading wen mubei he Guangzhou weinisi yinbi,” in *Kaogu* (June 1979), pp. 532-537.

(23) Song Gang, “The Many Faces of Our Lady: Chinese Encounters with the Virgin Mary between 7th and 17th Centuries”. *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies* (Dec 2018, 66), pp. 312.

(24) Yang Guangxian, an anti-Christian figure active in the early Qing Dynasty, stated that “Jesus is a traitor who is plotting against the righteousness of the law; he is not a law-abiding citizen.”

Yang Guangxian, “Bu de ji,” in *Tianzhujiao dongchuan wenxian xu bian* (Taipei: Student Book Company, 1966), pp. 1135.

(25) As Jacques Gernet argues, “the very first belief the Jesuits wanted to bring to East Asia was the devotion to the Virgin.” Jacques Gernet, René Étienne et al., *Mingqing jian ruhua yesuhui shi he zhongxi wenhua jiaoliu* (Chengdu: Bashu Publishing House, 1993), trans. Geng Sheng, pp. 94.

(26) Xie Zhaozhe, *Wu za zu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 2001), pp.82.

H. Bernard, *Tianzhujiao shiliu shiji zai hua chuanjiao zhi* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), pp. 282.

John E. McCall, “Early Jesuit Art in the Far East IV: in China and Macao before 1635,” in *Artibus Asiae* (1948, 11), pp. 47.

the Chinese deemed as in “ancient style” and “new style” respectively.⁽²⁷⁾ According to Xiang Da and Fang Hao, two historians specializing in Sino-foreign communications, the gifting of the two paintings marks the “original entry of Western art in China.”⁽²⁸⁾

Based on historical accounts, Ricci received a painting from Europe in 1598. The work was a reproduction of the altar painting at the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Sede in Seville. Known as *The Virgin of La Antigua Chapel*, this monumental icon in the Hodegetria type shows the Virgin and the Child at a full-body length (Fig.4).⁽²⁹⁾ However, upon arrival, the reproduced painting was already broken into three parts.⁽³⁰⁾ In 1599, Emanuel Dias Senior, the rector of St.Paul’s College in Macau, sent Ricci another bust-length painting, reproduced from the *Salus Populi Romani* icon in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica (Fig.5).⁽³¹⁾ Often attributed to St. Luke, the Santa Maria Maggiore Virgin received great popularity in Europe during the Age of Discovery, recreated into paintings and mass-produced intaglio prints (Fig.6).⁽³²⁾ Presumably, these two replicas were the two paintings gifted to Emperor Wanli by Ricci. Based on the artistic styles and conditions of the two pieces, *The Virgin of La Antigua Chapel* Virgin was likely considered “ancient,” while *Salus Populi Romani* was deemed “new” in style.⁽³³⁾

Although Ricci dedicated the two paintings to the royal court, their replicas managed to circulate in public. Ricci had once decorated the church in Zhaoqing with a miniature painting of the Virgin, which resembled the “new-styled” *Salus Populi Romani*, only smaller in size.⁽³⁴⁾ In the early 20th century, Dr. Berthold Laufer purchased a painting of Madonna in Xi’an, signed by a certain Tang Yin. This painting, showing the Virgin in a white robe, is now known as the Chinese Madonna and belongs to the collection of Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History (Fig.7).⁽³⁵⁾ Only in recent years has it been dug out from the museum storage and shown to the public. In both the ink scroll and the oil painting in the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, the depictions of Mary’s posture, hand gestures, and the style of her robe bear iconographic similarities, and the Chinese painter was likely influenced by the latter work. However, neither image stresses the regal status of the Virgin, leaving out the motifs of the crown, the scepter, and the throne. Rather, Mary is portrayed as a commoner, just like how she’d appear in the eyes of St. Luke.

(27) Han Qi, Wu Min, *Xi chao chong zheng ji, xi chao ding an: wai sanzong* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), pp. 20.

(28) Xiang Da, “Ming qing zhi ji zhongguo meishu suo shou xiyang zhi yingxiang,” in *Tang dai chang’an yu xiyu wenming* (Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 2009), pp. 396.

Fang Hao, *Zhongwai jiaotong shi* (Changsha: Yuelu Press, 1987), pp. 907.

(29) The painting is known as the Virgin of La Antigua chapel. Its date of completion, which remains disputable, is estimated to be between the 8th and the 15th century. Berthold Laufer, *Christian Art in China: Reprinted from Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen Jahrgang XIII*. Peiping: Wen Tien Ko, 1937,111. Harrie Vanderstappen, “Chinese Art and the Jesuits in Peking”, 106.

(30) Matteo Ricci, *Li madou quanji*, pp.284-285.

Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (Shanghai: Shanghai Far East Press, 2005), translated by Chen Heng and Mei Yizheng, pp.355.

(31) Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *Li madou zhongguo zhaji*, pp.377.

(32) The restoration of the painting was completed in 2018. The work is currently housed in the Pauline chapel. <https://fsspx.news/en/news-events/news/restoration-17th-century-salus-populi-romani-icon-st-mary-major-35397>

(33) Mo Xiaoye, *Shiqi zhi shiba shiji chuanjiaoshi yu xihua dongjian* (Hangzhou: The China Academy of Art Press, 2002), pp.56-57.

(34) H. Bernard, *Tianzhujiao shiliu shiji zai hua chuanjiao zhi*, pp. 281.

Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Press, 1998), translated by Chen Ruilin, pp.4.

(35) Whether the painting portrays Guanyin, the Virgin Mary, or Marian Guanyin (a figure that helped preserving faith during Japan’s ban of Christianity) remains disputable.

Dong Lihui, “Shengmu xingxiang zai zhongguo de xingcheng, tuxiang zhuanqi jiqi yingxiang,” in *Wenyi yanjiu* (Oct 2013), pp.132-142.

Chen Huihong, “Liang fu yesuhui shi de shengmu shengxiang: jian lun mingmo tianzhujiao de zongjiao,” in *Taida lishi xuebao* (June 2017), pp. 61-63.

Compared to the painting in “new style,” the more antique-looking Seville Virgin might better cater to the “ancient-loving” Chinese.⁽³⁶⁾ Published in the 17th century in Nanjing, *Chengshi Moyuan*, an acclaimed catalog of ink designs, includes a woodblock print of Madonna and the Child (Fig.8). The inscription on top is spelled in Roman letters, which reads “God.” This print shows the Virgin in a similar posture and gown to those in *The Virgin of La Antigua Chapel*, while including a halo and two angels as well. The Virgin’s right hand, pointing upward, indicates that the image was made in conformity with the classic Hodegetria type. Different from *Salus Populi Romani* and its Sinicized ink variant, the Chinese woodcut print and its prototype *The Virgin of La Antigua Chapel*, which was commissioned by the Queen of Aragon, stress the magnificence of clothing and the noble status of the characters.⁽³⁷⁾ The two angels holding the crown transform the depicted scene into a coronation, implying that the Virgin is no longer mortal but has transcended into heaven. However, after cross-cultural and trans-media translations, the Virgin’s clothes – painted and gilded in the original – are only rendered monochromatically in the woodblock print.⁽³⁸⁾ Besides, such clothing would not have been able to manifest the Virgin’s supremacy in a Chinese context, nevertheless. In the woodblock print, the crown is also depicted in a simplified manner, let alone the portrayal of the Holy Father. Appearing above the crown, God is reduced to a supporting character, indistinguishable from the two angels. While Ricci wrote explanatory texts in Chinese for the three other Christian woodblock prints in *Chengshi Moyuan*, this one was left with no caption.

The depictions of the Virgin can be found in an array of Chinese publications in the 17th century. Aside from commercially successful books, advertisements, and product catalogs such as *Chengshi Moyuan*, even within religious publications and pamphlets,⁽³⁹⁾ the image of Our Lady does not fully conform to the Western iconography of Maria Regina. More commonly, the Virgin is illustrated to be a woman who exemplifies the Confucian virtues (as seen in *Song Nianzhu Guicheng*, Fig.9), or an immortal female deity (as seen in the *Illustrated Life of Jesus*, Fig.10). In the Chinese Mariological texts from the same period, the depictions of Mary align with these visual representations: as an exemplary figure who meets the Confucian expectations in Feminine Conduct, Speech, Comportment, and Works (de yan rong gong 德顏容功), a loving mother who embodies the tradition of filial piety, and a Buddhist female deity.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In examining Chinese Mariology from the 7th to the 17th century, Professor Song Gang concludes that by the dawn of the Qing Dynasty, the Virgin had been remodeled to fit the Confucian ideal of womanhood. Intertwined with complex religious beliefs and dominant Confucian morals while exalting the superiority of power, the Sinicized image of the Virgin is epitomized by the figure of “Mother Emperor.”⁽⁴¹⁾

(36) Ricci, *Li madou quanji*, pp. 284.

John E. McCall, “Early Jesuit Art in the Far East IV: in China and Macao before 1635,” pp.48.

(37) Harrie Vanderstappen, “Chinese Art and the Jesuits in Peking”, *East Meets West: The Jesuits in China 1582-1773* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988), eds. Charles E. Ronan, pp. 106.

(38) Lin, Li-chiang. *The Proliferation of Images: The Ink-stick Designs and the Printing of the Fang-shih mo-p’u and the Ch’eng-shih mo-yuan* (Ph.D.Dissertation, Princeton University, 1998), pp. 213-4.

(39) Dong Lihui, “Li madou yu Chengshi moyuan: 17 shiji zhongguo jidujiao tuxiang zai shangye lingyu de chuanbo,” in *Meishu shi yu guannian shi* (Issue 24, Aug 2019), pp. 445-474.

(40) In the early writings of Luo Mingjian, the name of Mary was translated as “Xian ma li ya Tianzhu shengmu niangniang,” which borrowed the title for deity in the local tradition. The title “Xian” refers to the immortal deity in Daoism and similarly, “Tianzhu shengmu” refers to a female immortal, such as Dongling shengmu, Taiyuan shengmu. “Niangniang” is a popular title bestowed to a female deity, as seen in Tianfei niangniang, Songzi niangniang, Yanguang niangniang, etc.

Dai Guoqing, “Mingqing zhi ji shengmu maliya de zhongguo xingxiang yanjiu” (PHD Dissertation, South China Normal University, 2010), pp.101-160.

Dai Guoqing, *Shengmu Maliya zai zhongguo* (Taiwan: Taiwan Christian Art Press, 2014).

(41) Song Gang, “The Many Faces of Our Lady,” pp. 334-337.



Fig.7 The Chinese Madonna, ink and color on silk, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

Fig.8 The “Tian zhu” print collected in *Chengshi moyuan*, woodblock print

Fig. 9 Illustration for João da Rocha, *Song nianzhu guicheng*, the inscription reads: “40 days after Christmas, the Virgin presented Jesus Christ to the Lord”

Fig.10 Illustration for Giulio Alenio’s *Illustrated Life of Jesus*, the inscription reads: “the Virgin was crowned above all saints”

Adopted by Giacomo Rho in *Shengmu jingjie*, this unique title was unknown to Western theology, conjuring a Sinicized imagination of the Virgin as an honorable, authoritative mother figure, as conceived in Confucianism. Emphasizing the supremacy of Our Lady, the title expresses a similar sentiment as seen in Xu Guangqi’s *Eulogy on the Portrait of the Virgin Mary (Shengmu xiang zan)*: “her status is more superb than that of all gods... her virtue exceeds that of all saints.”⁽⁴²⁾

While textual descriptions managed to conjure up this image of the Virgin as a majestic, powerful figure, at the time, there was yet to be a localized visual language that could directly capture the essence of the “Mother Emperor.” Towards the end of the Middle Ages, European Christianity experienced a “visual” turn, by which sight and visuality became associated with spiritual belief and the existence of God.⁽⁴³⁾ The beginning of visual modernity was similarly marked by ideas such as “seeing strengthens beliefs” and “religion bestows art the power to be seen.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ In comparison, it was with the icon of Our Lady of China in the early 20th century that China eventually found its localized visual expression for the unique conception of the “Mother Emperor.”

3. Realism: The “Realist Desire” and the “Christianized Modernity”

Regardless of the difference in the many versions of Our Lady of China, their common adoption of Realist techniques is worth noting. As discussed earlier, Western missionaries believed that realism was the basic guarantee of an icon’s aesthetic quality. This conception is rooted in the artistic canon established by the Renaissance and

(42) Xu Guangqi, *Xu guangqi quanji (jiu)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2011), eds. Zhu Weizheng, Li Tiangang, pp. 420.

(43) Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Hidden God* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2017), trans. Li Qiuling, pp. 78-84.

(44) Roland Recht, *Seeing and Believing* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017), trans. Ma Yuexi, proofread by Li Jun, pp. 1-7.

reinforced throughout the development of Western art, which is also reflected in Matteo Ricci's critique of Chinese painters. For Ricci, they lacked the so-called "basic techniques" and "common knowledge" in painting, such as the skills to manage proportions and light and shadow.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Although the missionaries were deeply attracted to Chinese culture and friendly towards the Chinese, critiques like Ricci's show a Western-centric mode of thinking that judges art based on the realist canon, influenced by the styles dominating European art during the same period. This mode of thinking was similarly taken up by Father Flament in 1908, when he considered the work by the local painter not "artistic" and felt the need to hire painters who were professionally trained in Western realism to create a simultaneously "artistic" and "Chinese-looking" work. This started to change in the 1920s when Celso Costantini's aesthetic ideals started to influence local art-making. During the transitional period between the Ming and Qing Dynasty, the "common knowledge" in Western art was not the primary concern for Chinese painters, nor did the Chinese see the difference between European and Chinese painters as a result of their varied knowledge in painting. What Ricci referred to as "common knowledge" is but an alternative artistic choice: the realist techniques from the West were even regarded by the literati as "entirely absent of controlled brushwork" and "not to be considered as high art."⁽⁴⁶⁾

Despite being degraded as "unqualified" in the 17th century, by the early 20th century, Realism and representational art, which is built around the use of linear perspective, took on entirely different cultural, if not political, connotations for the Chinese. This shift occurred in tandem with the influx of foreign, modern notions, including the concept of "art" and "bijitsu," arriving in China from the West and Japan. In researching early photography—a representative device for producing realistic images—in China, scholar Yi Gu examines the increasing conflation of realism and the modern pursuit of truth in the Chinese cultural sphere during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Particularly, against the backdrop of the Xinhai Revolution, Gu looks into how "realism" was constructed as a sign of progressiveness, synonymous with the rejection of feudal superstitions, the promotion of "modern" knowledge, and the revelation of objective "truth." In constructing this new visual paradigm, *Zhenxiang hua bao (The Truth Record)*, a Shanghai-based magazine founded by the Lingnan School painters Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren in 1921, played a critical role.⁽⁴⁷⁾ During the early years of the Republic of China, realism had become a necessary tool for "revolution": as argued by Chen Duxiu during the New Culture Movement, "To improve Chinese painting, we must embrace the spirit of realism in Western painting ... we must adopt realism, so we can allow our talent to be expressed in our own paintings and not follow the steps of our ancestors."⁽⁴⁸⁾

Drawing upon her research on the urban consumer culture that targeted the Chinese intellectuals at the dawn of the Republic of China, Professor Laikwan Pang discerns a dominant force behind the new pictorial style that stressed the use of perspective and the detailed portrayal of facial features and expressions. Calling this force a "realist desire," Pang analyzes the significance of "realism" in the context of modernity from the perspective of Chinese intellectuals, contextualizing and pointing out the divergent meanings of "realism" as understood by Chinese and Western art at the beginning of the 20th century.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Unlike this "internal" perspective that comes from

(45) Ricci, *Li madou quanji*, pp.18.

(46) Zou Yigui, *Xiaoshan hua pu* (Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House, 2009), pp.144.

(47) Gu Yi, "What's in a Name? Photography and the Reinvention of Visual Truth in China, 1840–1911," in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol 95 (2013, 1), pp. 131.

(48) Chen Duxiu, "Meishu geming," in *Ershi shiji zhongguo meishu wenxuan*, eds. Lang Shaojun, Shui Tianzhong, pp. 29.

(49) Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China*, pp. 48.

the intellectual sphere, American scholar James Hevia casts an eye on how “external” forces and opinions—the Western civilization—shaped and disciplined the public image of the Chinese during the late Qing Dynasty. Paying special attention to the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, Hevia notes how Western missionaries, in reaction to the aftermath of the uprising, connected it with various religious narratives. Drawing analogy to the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent re-establishment of the Christian order, they evoked a Millenarianist optimism that believes in the overcoming of barbarism by a revived civilization. In this “regeneration” project set out by the missionaries, the rebuilding of churches and sacred sites, along with the evocation of saint figures, was an important part.

The reconstruction of the church in Donglü, Baoding, precisely took place during this period, followed by it becoming a place of pilgrimage, leading to the creation and public display of the first two paintings of Our Lady of China. Quite ironically characterized by Hevia, these developments brought forth a “Christianized modernity,” which “effectively fixed the interpretation of the events of 1900 as one in which foreigners, not the Chinese people, were innocent victims. From that point forward, it would be difficult to contemplate Western imperialism in China without also conjuring up an image of Chinese irrationality and savage barbarism.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ Hevia therefore argues, because the survival story of the Christian mission in China after the 1900 debacle fitted the religious meta-narratives of suffering, redemption, and resurrection, it granted legitimacy to this modernity built upon Christian morals, successfully creating the image of “Chinese irrationality” for the world. It was within this context that realist art, which conforms to the Westernized modality of seeing and perceiving objectivity, naturally became a way to enlighten the Chinese people on achieving “rationality.”

Doubly driven by the internal “realist desire” and the external “Christianized modernity,” the image of Our Lady of China—one that is lifelike and religious—was thus born. Paradoxically, whether from an insider, intellectual standpoint or from an outside, global perspective, by the early 20th century, the illusionist “realist” art had already become formally conservative, if not anti-modernist. Upon landing in China, however, it became an integral part of the awakening of China’s modernity.

Hevia’s concept of this Western-centric “Christianized modernity” is similar to what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “the right to look.” That is, the construction of visual culture defines what can be looked at, what is worth being looked at, what is the correct way of looking, what is deemed “art,” and what is not: “‘civilization’ could now visualize, whereas the “primitive” was ensconced in the heart of darkness produced by the willed forgetting of centuries of encounter.”⁽⁵¹⁾ Admittedly, this comes from the scholar’s profound reflection on Western-centrism, which opens up the possibilities for rethinking issues that were previously dismissed. Nevertheless, the dichotomies between civilization and primitivism, looking and being looked at, visibility and invisibility are not diametrically opposed – the powerless group is not entirely severed from its powerful other, nor is it forever stuck in the past. Rather, it survives in the constant reshaping of the visual landscape by the dominant power, by reshaping itself. A “circulatory history” thus emerges, as described by Prasenjit Duara, by way of “absorption or unacknowledged ‘borrowings’ and hierarchical encompassment”. “[T]he real history,” Duara continues, “is based on multiple interactions and circulatory transformations.”⁽⁵²⁾

(50) James Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Beijing: Social Science Literature Press), trans. Liu Tianyu, Deng Hongfeng, pp. 321-323.

(51) Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look,” in *Xiandaixing de shijue zhengti: shijue xiandaixing duben* (Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2020), trans. Wu Xiaolei, eds. Tang Hongfeng, p.147.

(52) Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and A Sustainable Future* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2017), trans. Huang Yanjie, pp.11, 87.

Conclusion: Another Possibility for Visual Modernity

If the history of humanity can be roughly divided into premodern, modern, and postmodern periods, then, as Martin Jay states, modernity is distinctly marked by visuality: “The modern era [...] has been dominated by the sense of sight in a way that set it apart from its premodern predecessors and possibly its postmodern successor.”⁽⁵³⁾ Organizing the visual paradigms that dominated the Western visual culture into what he terms the “scopic regime”, Jay distinguishes three competing models that characterized modernity.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The Our Lady of China icon, in fact, falls somewhere in between the first two models, embodying certain characteristics common in both “the Cartesian Perspectivalism” and “the Art of Describing.” While the former is epitomized by the prevalence of the perspective technique in Western art since the Renaissance, the latter is built upon the empiricist philosophy of Francis Bacon. Represented by Flemish art, which values optical experiences and attends to details, it prefigured the fragmentation of photographic images and the prevailing of naturalism. In this regard, the “realism” that underpins the creation of Our Lady of China cannot be strictly categorized into any of these Western realist canons described above.

At the same time, situating Our Lady of China within the context of early 20th century China, it pursues a realism that differentiates itself from the truth-seeking, realist drive (as demonstrated by *Zhenxiang hua bao*); nor does it conform to the realism sought by the New Culture Movement (as expressed in “Art Revolution”) or the “realist desire” of the urban consumer culture (as seen in the early advertisements and films in the Republic of China). The editors of *Zhenxiang hua bao* treat realism as a means for achieving objective truth, but the making of Our Lady of China prioritizes the creation of an illusionist representation of a religious figure over the inquiry of scientific truth. Similarly, Chen Duxiu retools realism to advocate for unique artistic gestures and a brand new cultural “revolution,” while Our Lady of China aims to evoke a mysterious religious experience rather than individual creativity. In addition, the image was legitimized through the traditional folk belief of Marian apparition, and the New Culture Movement precisely deemed supernatural experiences as superstitious and feudalist, rather than progressive and modern. Lastly, the Donglü Virgin was first presented to the villagers in Donglü and the Christians living in the rural area. The audience for both this image and the consecrated Our Lady of China icon was not limited to the urban middle-class and the elite intellectuals. Rather, they were primarily created for the rural population, a demographic largely ignored by researchers of modernity.

Indeed, Our Lady of China finds itself somewhere between China and the West: simultaneously Chinese and Western, yet neither fully Chinese nor entirely Western, it eventually grew into a peculiar hybrid of both. For the Chinese visual art, the creation and circulation of this image represented an attempt to achieve an alternative mode of modernity at the dusk of the Qing Dynasty, one that oscillated between the numerous binaries gradually developed in early 20th century China, between science and mysticism, progressiveness and conservatism, urban modernity and rural obscurantism (or pre-modern feudalism). As it was estranged from the dominant scopic regimes of the West, it situated itself within the existing narratives that outline the Chinese modernity, such as the “masculine” conception of modernity built upon revolutionary narrative, the “feminine” modernity stemmed from the developments in fashion, the modernity of high art and aesthetics, of vernacular culture, of realism, and of modernism itself. Refusing to be generalized by any of them, the icon conjures up a unique and alternative visual modernity, combining cultures from China and the West and bridging many oppositions.

(53) Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality* (Bay Press, 1998), eds. Hal Foster, p.3.

(54) *Ibid*, pp.3-20.

中文题目：

圖繪“中華聖母”：視覺現代性在中國的另類可能

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提要：“中華聖母像”是傳統與外來文化在中國民間相遇、雜糅、進而融合新生的一個視覺文化案例。通過回溯“女王聖母”形象歷經數個世紀的視覺轉換脈絡，本文認為，直到20世紀初“中華聖母像”的創製，將聖母作為“母皇”的獨特本土觀念，才有效實現本土化的視覺呈現。在此基礎上，可以看到，“中華聖母像”既承載了為以往學界所知的“寫實”的現代價值和“基督教化的現代性”表征，同時又在現有諸種現代性範式之外，呈現出20世紀早期中國視覺現代性的另一種路徑。

關鍵詞：中華聖母、東閩聖母、女王聖母、視覺現代性、土山灣