

Ecclesiastical Painting in Chinese Books on the Bible

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The Setting

It is unusual for an introductory level book written in English or other western languages to include numerous ecclesiastical paintings as illustrations, unless of course the book is about the Bible or ecclesiastical arts. In China today, it is very rare to find a Chinese language book on the Bible without ecclesiastical paintings. They are tucked into the books as illustrative insertions. These images predominate in most books relating to the Bible, except for direct translations of western works that mirror the originals in both typesetting and illustrations.

Below I list several books along with a brief summary of each author's background and the way he draws on ecclesiastical paintings. My presentation will include slides (currently posted at <http://picasaweb.google.com/ecclesiastical>).

《希伯来文化》 *Hebrew Culture* (2004) was published after the author Zhu Weizhi (1905-1999) died in 1999¹. Apparently, his disciples decided upon the contents of the posthumous work, such as the front and back covers and the many black and white illustrations derived from ecclesiastical paintings. Zhu's research interest included the Bible, biblical literature, Judaism and Christianity. Trained in Nanking Theological Seminary, Japan's Waseda University and Chuo University in the early 20th century, he likely was the sole biblical scholar who survived the Cultural Revolution in Communism China. A low key scholar during his lifetime, he was elevated to prominence by a handful of disciples.

《圣经解读》 *Introducing the Bible* (2003) was authored by Liang Gong and his numerous graduate students at Henan University. It was the opening work that led to an ambitious project of five additional volumes (on different sections of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles²). Liang, originally trained in Chinese literature, earned a master degree in biblical studies under Zhu Weizhi in the 1980s and is considered his disciple. Zhu has been one of the most productive scholars in the field, in terms of both publications and training graduate students.

《<圣经>的文学阐释》 *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (2004) was written by Liu Yiqing, professor of English literature theory in the English Department at Peking University. Liu was trained in English Literature at Peking University in the 1960s, and went on to earn a Masters Degree in American English Literature from SUNY Albany and Ph. D. from the University of Chicago English Department. The book summarizes various literary analyses of biblical narratives. It provides many examples of textual analysis, and from this perspective it is not an introductory work. Its intended readers are graduate level students informed regarding literary theory. The book includes ten full color ecclesiastical paintings, each with a brief sentence describing the action in the painting (always a biblical scene). If a reader had no

¹ For commercial reason, the famous editor and author of 2 chapters out of the book's 11 chapters was listed as editor in chief. He supposedly penned the preface to the book – at least 5 years before publication.

² These were published shortly after the first volume and have nearly identical typesetting and illustration styles.

background knowledge of ecclesiastical paintings, then the paintings would seem beautifully executed illustrations done by a contemporary illustrator specifically appointed for the book.

《创世纪，传说与译注》 *Genesis, Legends and Translation with Notes* (2004). Author Feng Xiang, an English literature major at Peking University, went on to earn a Ph. D. in Medieval Literature from Yale University and J. D. from Harvard Law School. He is now an intellectual property lawyer in the U.S. It is interesting to note he decided that his first book on the Bible directed at a Chinese audience would include dozens of ecclesiastical paintings as illustrations. One characteristic that distinguishes these illustrations is the meticulous attention to quality. Accompanying each reproduced painting is the artwork's name, and the artist's last name, dates of birth and death, and nationality. This quality heretofore is unique in a book about the Bible published in Chinese. It likely reflects the author's wide spectrum of academic training. Additionally, the author explained his choice of art works:

"Some comments on the 60 illustrations in the book are necessary. They are mostly western famous paintings; only very few of them are pictures of archaeological objects. The criteria for choosing these paintings are their artistic values. It is not to be assumed that they have illustrative functions of historical reality. The artists could not have paid attention to the historical details; their emphasis is the characters in the Bible and their stories. Readers beware, these paintings are not reflections of the reality in biblical times, for example, the clothing and utensils (are not those of the biblical times)." (p. 13).

《圣经导读》 *A Reader's Guide to the Bible* (2005) was written by scholar Sun Yi. He teaches an introductory level Bible course at the People's University in Beijing. A second printing in 2006 indicates the book was selling. The author's training focused on Christianity thoughts (Ph. D. in philosophy from Peking University). The author did the book research and material preparation at Helsinki University in Finland. At the very front of the book are 27 full color pictures, just about all of them ecclesiastical paintings. Although each art work is titled with information regarding the artist, year of production, and its current whereabouts, the author does not reveal how and where he acquired all the pictures, a failing typical of most books about the bible, including all the above mentioned books. The ecclesiastical reproductions could be from any number of art history encyclopedias readily available in western libraries. Scattered throughout the book are many visual aids for the reader. Some are merely black and white versions of ecclesiastical paintings devoid of any information about the art works. The reader presumably should treat them as illustrations for the surrounding text.

It is not my intention today to show you the artworks inserted in the books, determine who painted them and the background of the artists, or dwell on the iconographical implications of the paintings³. These issues are of no consequence to the intended audience and thus not

³ Whoever is interested in such an effort can trace the paintings back to their source. It can be a tedious process, since the criteria of choosing one art work over another is not based on genre, nor on the era of the artist, but more or less on how descriptive the artworks are in terms of illustrating the biblical story and associated concepts. The shortest path I can think of for an art lay person like myself is to use an internet tool with both pictures and descriptions of the works, such as Wikipedia. A good starting point for this goal would be http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_art#Christian_European_sacred_art. So far, this effort is not yet completely replaceable by computers, unfortunately or fortunately, depending on where one stands. The simple but sophisticated effort of matching one painting to another across size and medium, as well reproduction quality,

concern us. Instead, I will raise a few questions that I asked myself and explore some preliminary thoughts. As we shall see, the process of searching for answers touches on disturbing layers of history involving Christianity and China.

A picture is worth a thousand words

A natural question one might ask is *why use illustrations in introductory books to the Bible?* Well, the obvious and reactive answer is that illustrations help readers to understand the concepts and western versions of this type of book generally include a bunch of illustrations. But in China there is an additional rationale – illustrations are of essential importance in books dealing with religion. The other popular faiths in China, Daoism and Buddhism⁴, feature plenty of images, paintings and statues representing their belief systems. The main heroic characters, Buddhist and Taoist saints, have corresponding iconographical representations in paintings and sculptures. The legendary scenes of these religions are fully represented in artistic works. Therefore, readers of an introductory book on the Bible, another religious canon, expect to see images of the relevant deities and human characters. This conventional format facilitates Chinese understanding and acceptance of the Bible.

However, there are no stock images of the Bible in the Chinese culture⁵. Authors therefore found a slew of these sorts of images among ecclesiastical paintings. Although the paintings do not form a systematically complete imagery of Bible based religions and cultures, they are the best available material. From the Chinese point of view, these artworks will have to suffice. For some authors, the pictures included in the books do no more than provide the readers a concrete image of biblical literature. However, since all authors have done this independently, it is logical to suggest that the insertion of ecclesiastical images reflects a collective subconscious effort to “sinologize”⁶ the Bible for the Chinese readers.

Copyright is not an issue as long as pictures of the painting can be found in encyclopedias published in China. It is certainly cheaper and more pragmatic than hiring artists to do the illustrations. Furthermore, in China today, there are no artists who specialize in doing illustrations of this type. Knowledge on the Bible, even just telling biblical stories, was abruptly interrupted in 1949 when the new communism China was established. A revival of sorts has begun, as can be seen in the years of publication of the above books.

A western painting or sculpture is even better

Once the need for images of biblical canon is established, the question remains *why western*

is still accomplished better by human eyes and brains than by computers. By the time a computer even initiates the algorithm process, human brains likely have put out a tentative answer.

⁴ This author maintains the view that Confucianism is not a religion, but merely a philosophical and ethical system. Islam, which has a very different repertoire of religious imaginary, has a relatively large number of followers, but the religion is limited to a few ethnic groups in China. Therefore, it is excluded from our discussion.

⁵ Chinese Christian painting had a long sporadic history, but the scope of the artists' works seldom touched upon themes and scenes other than the “Madonna and Child” and the “Crucifixion”. Few high quality images of these works are preserved. For more details on Chinese Christian art, see Gu Weimin, “History of Chinese Christian Art,” *Studies in World Religion*, 2008, 1, pp. 88-98.

⁶ There is no such term in English; but I cannot find a term to crystallize the idea of “giving imported concepts a Chinese cultural touch, or make it Chinese”.

paintings and, particularly, why illustrations of western human characters? One reason, as I mentioned above, is the abundance of western ecclesiastical paintings. Another motive has to do with the Chinese intellectuals' perception of western oil paintings, which reaches back to the introduction of western art to China.⁷

Western paintings and techniques such as chiaroscuro and perspective were brought to China in the late 16th century by missionaries. To achieve their goals, the missionaries found that they needed to build close ties with central government officials. Consequently, the first groups of Chinese who had the chance to see western art were the royal family in Beijing and central government officials. The paintings employed chiaroscuro and perspective techniques that rendered human beings and other objects with a photographic likeness to reality. The quality impressed the Chinese aristocratic viewers.

Ironically, what sealed the superior status of the western paintings was not the works themselves, but the advanced weapons, especially the artillery that was introduced to China by the same group of missionaries. The arms were sold to the Chinese army, which used them to suppress peasants revolts. The Chinese credited the highly admired weapon technology to the western knowledge system. Along with armaments, missionaries and merchants brought science, mathematics, western painting techniques, Christian iconographical paintings, and Christianity. These features of western culture naturally enjoyed an elevated status among Chinese aristocrats. From this beginning, perhaps, Christianity and western oil paintings were wrapped in a shroud of mystery and obscurity in China. And with this mystery, western oil painting gained an aura of elegance.

Even in contemporary Chinese society, western oil painting is revered. Likewise, ballet and symphonic music are seen as fine expressions of the elegant mythical western culture. The attitude of a Chinese towards these foreign elements may be similar to the feelings of early western colonists stirred up by "exotic oriental" cultural curiosities. The sentiment is complex. In many ways, it has not changed much over the past few centuries.

Psychologically, the feeling might derive from humiliation experienced by the Chinese culture collectively during the last two centuries. The initial sense of superiority over the first westerner encountered was shattered when the Chinese military armed with inferior weapons and tactics confronted western armies. The feelings before and after were of too much a contrast. The emotional comedown left an enduring scar of general cultural inferiority, which led a variety of movements that questioned all aspects of the Chinese culture. The sense of cultural striving still prevails. Among Chinese, the most impressive achievement of the 2008 Beijing Olympics was the sophisticated technology and the meticulous precision of the opening ceremony. Western media focused on artistic and other elements of the opening⁸. This divergence is reminiscent of the scar obtained by the Chinese nearly two centuries ago.

⁷ For detailed discussion refer to Zhao Wei, "Introduction of Western Painting into China between the Ming and the Qing Dynasties and its Influences," *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute Fine Arts & Design*, 2003, 4, pp. 44-49.

⁸ See interview of director, Zhang Yimou, widely published in all media in China after the opening ceremony.

To sum up, since western oil paintings are revered as a crucial element of western sophistication, I conclude that copies of “elegantly” executed western oil or fresco painting inserted in a book about the Bible reflect the authors yearning for elegance in their books.

Bible and Christianity in China

Although a group of missionaries introduced both western oil painting and the Bible hundreds of years ago, the two subjects experienced very different outcomes in China. Oil paintings and its techniques have been accepted by Chinese artists with few interruptions, but the status of the Bible, due to its ideological nature, has seen some ups and downs.

The transmission history of the Bible in China is an exceedingly complex story. Suffice to say, the book has experienced some of the most glorious as well as most humiliating treatment in its life span of more than two millennia. It was adopted as the authoritative canon by the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history with death toll of over 20 million. It was also treated as the source of all foreign evil by the Boxers' Movement (1899-1901). This led to the killing of tens of thousands of religious people who believed in the book – Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Protestants, lay believers and missionaries, Chinese and foreign alike. It was read and revered by many of the famous intellectuals and thinkers in the revolutionary May 4th movement (1919), which symbolized the end of feudal imperial China and the start of China's democratic movement. Nevertheless, due to its role as a tool of western imperial colonization, it was denounced as a pillar of the evil capitalist venom by the Mao Zedong led Communist and New China movement (1949). Curiously, Mao was an avid admirer and eulogizer, together with Karl Marx and Sun Yat-sen, of the Taiping Movement's ideologies based on the Bible.

The book of the Bible in Chinese translation along with local and independent branches of Chinese Christianity survived the last half century in China. However, besides biblical texts, only in the last decade were books introducing the Bible permitted and colleges allowed to offer courses about the Bible. Chinese intellectuals once again claimed there is something of value in the Book and the Judeo-Christian religions. The ethical ideals might help solve the social and moral problems of modern China, reflected in events such as the recent baby-formula incident. And again, these intellectuals have assumed the responsibility to find answers in the Bible, really starting with baby steps, by writing books introducing the Bible to the Chinese readers. Presumably, colorful pictures of elegant paintings inserted in the books will only do good.

Before the Chinese readers witnessed the ecclesiastical paintings, the sole stock image of Christianity in China was Jesus on the cross found in churches surviving from the pre-communism era and as common ornaments such as necklaces. Interestingly enough, this most popular image of ecclesiastical paintings seldom appears as a book insert. Perhaps the authors intend to distance their books from “old imperialistic” Christianity and the “evil” Bible. They wish to disconnect the introduction to the Bible from a tradition of painful

memories in early 19th and early 20th century China.

A Life of its own

The original artists never imagined that reproductions of their work would show up in Chinese books. The paintings are not photographs from the ancient Palestine, where the biblical characters lived and the stories took place. They are artistic renditions of the biblical tradition. In a sense, the paintings do not draw Chinese readers closer to biblical reality, but transport them to a whimsical vision of Bible stories.

The authors expected the paintings would make the biblical characters and stories clear and more accessible. Objectively though, they added a layer of mystery and richness to the happenings. It is difficult to judge the effect of the added layer of meaning, but the paintings seem to pertain more to Europe than the region in western Asia where the Bible originated. Nevertheless, if explained carefully, the artwork provides an insight to the mentality of the religious artists who lived during the historical era when Christianity had its initial meaningful contact with China. At least in this sense, the ecclesiastical paintings help the Chinese better understand the religions and cultures that base their faith on the Bible.

Further, the ecclesiastical artwork currently is shaping the Chinese understanding of the Bible and its influence will continue for a long time to come. The artists' works acquired an unexpected longevity in a part of the world remote from their local or thoughts. The symbiotic relationship between the arts and religion manifests in odd ways.

A new era has now begun for the Bible and Judeo-Christian religions in China. Borrowing is common during the initial stages, as reflected in the ecclesiastical paintings used as inserts. It is natural for us to assume that when Chinese Christian art finds its footing, probably as Christianity grows in China, we might see less and less western paintings in books, perhaps replaced by Chinese artwork. That would be a new page in the books of art history and world religion.